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LADY SAW

[QUEEN OF THE DANCEHALL]

“I’M FAMOUS BECAUSE OF MY SLACKNESS.”

Inspiration for songs:
Good sex with a good man
Bad sex
A date that doesn't pay for dinner
Just being out in the world

In the early 1990s, when Lady Saw exploded onto the Jamaican music scene, she was best known for displaying in her songs and act a degree of raunchy “slackness” unmatched by any previous female artist. Since that time, she’s retained her dancehall crown by dint not merely of her outsize charisma and talent, but of the searching sensibility of an artist who’s scored Jamaican hits employing styles ranging from the tender twang of her country ballad “Give Me the Reason” to the exultant toasting of step-off anthems like “Chat to Mi Back.” The first female dancehall singer to headline shows outside Jamaica, she also entered North American pop consciousness via her hit-making appearance on No Doubt’s “Underneath It All,” the Orange County punkers’ 2002 smash that won her triple-platinum status and a Grammy for Best Record by a Duo or Group.

Born in 1972 to a large family in a small town in rural Jamaica, Marion Hall (as Lady Saw calls herself offstage) spent her girlhood racing wooden carts and learning to sing in church. In her teens she moved from her island’s countryside to its capital’s swelling slums, working for a time as a sweatshop seamstress before becoming Lady Saw and, as she puts it, “getting famous.” In addition to the hundreds of dancehall singles she’s authored or graced with a verse, she’s also released three full-length albums. All are marked, like their creators’ style of conversing, by a Prince-like affinity for veering joyously in tone from pious to lewd. This summer she will put out My Way, her ninth LP and her first to be released independently, on her own label, Divas Records.

On the warm December evening we were scheduled to meet in Kingston, our plan called for me to go see the Queen of the Dancehall at her home high in the hills over the city.

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Just before the appointed hour, though, she called to say she was hungry and to meet her at T.G.I. Friday's instead. Arriving at the restaurant in a posh section of uptown Kingston, I found Marion and her sister settled into a corner booth, laughing and sipping their drinks, across the street from the fabled house where Bob Marley lived but never quite settled in the 1970s, writing songs about wanting to disturb his neighbors after riding his own musical success out of Kingston's ghetto. While we ate and talked, Marion paused often to laugh and pose for snapshots with admirers. I had the Cajun chicken sandwich and two Red Stripes; Marion had a virgin strawberry daiquiri and the alfredo salmon pasta with a glass of white wine.

—Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

I. "THE GUYS WERE DOING IT, WHY COULDN'T A WOMAN DO IT?"

THE BELIEVER: I wonder if you could talk about your childhood. How did you get started in music?

LADY SAW: I started singing in church, when I was about seven, eight years old. When I was a girl, my father started taking us to a Seventh-day Adventist church; he and my mother raised six of us. He got us all baptized. I'm not talking like baby baptism—I'm talking about dipping under the water, you know, in the name of the Holy Ghost and all them things. *[Laughs]* So I used to go up and sing in church every Saturday—that's the Sabbath for Seventh-day Adventists—and people there used to say I had a very good voice. And then I used to listen to the radio, to Barry G—he was the radio disc jockey on JBC who was very popular at the time—and listen to all the singers on there. People like Sister Nancy, who I really admired.

I also started going to the dance hall when I was young. Sometimes when my mother and father would go night-fishing, we'd sneak out and go the place where everyone danced. I had an older sister who'd sneak us up by the window. The dance hall was very close to where we were living. And I used to hide, and look in the window and see my grandmother dancing there to all those old songs—shaking her legs like that, you know—and I used to try to dance like her.

BLVR: I understand the old folks in your hometown in St. Mary parish had a name for you as a little girl—"Winey winey."

LS: *[Laughs]* Yes. I got that name from the man in town who had the sound system—Leyton was his name. He was right across from our house. Leyton would put that sound system on, string those speakers up, I'd be out there *wining* ["dancing, gyrating" in Jamaican slang]. And he started calling me "Winey winey." I was *wining* like it was going out of style! And Leyton gave me that name, "Winey Winey," and

that's what they called me.

So I was always dancing. Singing too. When I was a girl, I would make up songs for fun. Then I realized, after making them up, that I could remember how they went a week later—I remember that's when I thought: Maybe I'm gonna be a singer.

BLVR: It was after you moved to Kingston, where you worked sewing in the Free Zone, that you got into making records, deejaying. How'd that happen?

LS: I linked up with a number of different producers at the start. A lot of them were reducers, not producers. *[Laughs]* But then I did some stuff with a female producer, and she *was* a producer: she didn't make promises she couldn't fulfill. She recorded me. And then one day I was home listening to the radio, and I heard myself, and I was like, "That's me, that's me! Turn it up!" The song was called "Half-and-Half Love Affair"—it was about having an affair with a man, you know, when he's someone else's man: so it's a half-and-half love affair.

After that I met a lot of producers—Derrick Barnett and Castro Brown from New Name Musik, and they start recording me. And then I met "Sampalue"—Garfield Phillips, from Diamond Rush, and he started recording me too.

BLVR: Your first big hit with Sampalue was also one of your most controversial—"Stab Out the Meat." How'd that come about?

LS: I met Garfield one day when he was down visiting from America—he was living up there at the time. And he said he'd heard one of my songs. He'd heard this particular song, and thought it was by a different artist, a more established woman in music, but a friend of his had told him that it was this new girl—"Female Saw," as I was called at the time. And he liked the song and wanted to meet me. And he liked me, and I liked him too. At first I said, Let's keep it professional. But then, you know, we started dating. And then, boom! He started producing me. We made some nice little clean songs. But then I made that X-rated song with Garfield—and that blew up. I blew up. When I was making the clean songs, no one paid attention. I was just another girl. But when I became outspoken, raunchy and X-rated, then everyone was like, "My God! Did she say that? She's raw, she's raunchy, she's bad"—and that's what really got me out there.

But you know, my other big song at that time was a very different kind of song. Garfield also produced that one—"Work a Miracle." "Find a Good Man," as they called it.

BLVR: That was your first song to go number one in Jamaica.

LS: Yes. And that was a real female anthem—so many women would come up to me then and say, "I'm so glad you made that song, because I'm asking God for a good man too."

I became like the female adviser. I became known as someone who spoke for women, who was always defending them.

BLVR: When you first blew up, there were very few female deejays in the dancehall—and even fewer doing slackness that matched the men. But you came out discussing sex frankly from a woman’s point of view—songs like “Backshot” and “Sycamore Tree.” I know there were people saying that a woman shouldn’t be doing these kinds of songs, or dancing how you did, simulating sex onstage—there was a lot of resistance and ridicule.

LS: Ha! The boys were doing it and people wouldn’t say anything. But when I came out, all kinds of people were saying, “She’s too rude, she’s raunchy, she’s too X-rated. There was a time when they said they didn’t want me to perform in Montego Bay—the mayor there tried to get me banned. But he was just a damn drunk anyway, so what kind of example was he setting? But I had a lot of fans who said, “Hell no, he can’t tell her she can’t perform here.” Big controversy.

BLVR: Many people celebrate you as someone who challenged a double standard—that men are allowed to be explicit when singing about sex, but women weren’t allowed to do the same. Were you consciously aiming to address that double standard, or just trying to express things you wanted to sing about?

LS: I did it to get attention! *[Laughs]* The guys were doing it, why couldn’t a woman do it? But I stand behind every song I did. People questioned me, but that slackness—it made me famous. A lot of high-society people—we call them “uppity uppitys”—were saying I was too rude. I was inappropriate. But when a lot of those people would meet me, and they’d say, “She’s such a nice person!” They’d see that I wasn’t a rude person at all, and some of them would take it all back. And some of them, the high-society men, they’d come over the room and say, “My wife loves you.” *[Laughs]* But they couldn’t let the people know that they approved of my kind of music.

BLVR: People were opposing slackness to “legitimate” culture. But there’s a long tradition in that culture of liberated Jamaican women making their voices heard, no? I think, for example, of the great folklorist and comedian Louise Bennett—those lines of hers: “Jamaica oman cunning say! / Is how dem jinnal so? / Look how long dem liberated / And de man dem never know.”

LS: I loved Louise. We all did. She did it a different way [from me], though—with class, and funny. So she was different. But you know—she did do a song called “Under the Sycamore Tree” too. My version’s X-rated. But Louise did a song *[singing]*: “Under the sycamore tree / dar-ling...” It’s about getting her first kiss under that tree. But you know she got laid under there! *[Laughs]*

Even when I was a young girl—“Winey winey,” sneaking in the dancehall—I remember a song that went [*singing*]: “Gyal, I hope yuh baggy get wet.” The man sings, “Turned off the pipe last night, turned the cock very tight.” That’s not even that slick. [*Laughs*] I was very young, and I knew it was X-rated. But when a woman like me is being slack, all these problems?

BLVR: Today you’re a great hero to many women in Jamaica. Who were some of the women you grew up admiring?

LS: In music, I loved Sister Nancy. When I used to watch her, she was so good—she still is, actually! I just saw her recently. She really inspired me. A strong woman, a good performer. But then it was all kinds of women around me who I admired. I had a teacher called Miss Gracie, for one. I used to go around her house, spend lots of time watching her. She was independent, took care of her house and herself. And she had all kinds of progressive friends, too. I looked up to those women—anyone who was progressive, who took care of themselves.

I’ve done songs about my mother [e.g., “Mama G”], all that I owe her. [But] my mother was very quiet, laid-back. My father used to talk shit to her, and that used to kill us as kids. So I never had any experience from her, really, about how to deal with a man. Because I never saw her talk up to a man. Like I’d do—if any man gives me any shit at all, I say, “Kiss my ass.” In a way Mama never could. So I never got any of that energy from her—she always told me to behave myself. She’d be like, “What is it that you’re doing that these people are trying to have you banned?” She didn’t really know I was saying some things. [*Laughs*]

II. “THE MUSIC’S DIFFERENT NOW. BUT EVERY TIME IT STARTS CHANGING, I CHANGE WITH IT.”

BLVR: I wonder if you could talk about your early influences, music-wise. You came up during a time when Jamaican music was making that transition from the roots reggae of the ’70s to the dancehall of the ’80s—“from the red, gold and green,” as the dub poet Mutabaruka put it, “to gold chains”—with drum machines coming in with Steely and Clevie, sped-up rhythms, more explicit toasting about sex, violence, life.

LS: I heard all that old reggae when I was a girl. There was that sound system, always played it across the street. But then when the music started changing, King Toyan came out with “Spar Wid Me” and Barry G started playing it on the radio—and Sister Nancy came back with her version. When that new music came out, that new style—that’s when I decided I really wanted to be a deejay.

BLVR: You took your name from another one of those ’80s

dancehall greats, Tenor Saw.

LS: I loved Tenor Saw. Tenor Saw—and Pinchers, too, who lived in the same community as me, in Kingston 13. They were my favorite. I used to go watch Tenor Saw even when I didn't have any money, through a crack in the zinc fence, enjoy his performance that way.

He had that melodic style, you know—[singing] “Ring the Alarm.” And at the start I tried to sound just like him. I was *all* about Tenor Saw. But I caught on pretty early that the way to making it is to be original. And so I came up with my own sound, my own style—more aggressive and raw, more aggressive than any other female.

BLVR: When you came out in the early '90s with VP Records, you were part of a generation of artists that was bringing dancehall to another new stage—a number of producers were coming out, vocalists like yourself, Bounty Killer, Beenie Man, Buju Banton; all those people were coming out then. It must have been an exciting time.

LS: It was exciting. But you know, all times are exciting. I grew up listening to ska, merengue, old-time music. I'd go to “nine nights”—which is what they set up when people died—and people used to use graters, the graters they used to grate coconuts, to make music. We'd call it “dinky minny.” The music's different now. But every time it starts changing, I change with it. Like now: I'm [nearly] forty now—I never hide my age—and the music's even faster. But I'm kicking asses harder than any of these young chicks coming up. They can't stand beside me. I spit like a real deejay. Like the best men—I can spit harder than most of them. I spit from way down here [motioning to gut]; I can work for hours. I don't have competition, because that's how good I am. I love it.

BLVR: You've done hit duets with a lot of those people—Beenie Man, Shabba Ranks. But then you've also worked with a number of foreign artists—Missy Elliott, Eve. No Doubt, of course, with whom you won the Grammy.

LS: I love doing the collabs with overseas artists—you know, they tend to get on the Billboards, the Grammys, all that. We're international artists here [in Jamaica]—we're internationally known. But sometimes we need that push. That's how you get yourself out there. And with Jamaican artists, I don't have a problem working with you, if you got talent. To help you get out there, keep myself out there. Once it's good music, I'll do it. No problem.

BLVR: How did recording with No Doubt come about?

LS: [Legendary Jamaican producers and rhythm-section drummer and bassist] Sly and Robbie called me up—they're my darlings, I love them. They said, “No Doubt is in Jamaica and wants to do a collab.” And I said, “OK, on my way.” [Laughs] So I went to the studio, and they played me the song, and showed me where my spot was. And I started writing, and I was done in a minute. And Gwen [Stefani] and

the whole group, they were all like, “Bravo! You’re so good. You’re so quick.” And it was done in a minute, and boom: it was a hit. I loved that.

BLVR: Is that how you write your toasts usually—listen to a riddim and see what it inspires? How do you come up with songs?

LS: I can do it either way. Every way. Sometimes I get the riddim and write to it. Sometimes I come up with the song and do it all. I can do it all ways. I’m inspired to write songs by all kinds of things. Good sex with a good man, that might inspire a song. Bad sex—that might inspire a different kind of song. *[Laughs]* If we’re having dinner and you don’t pay, that might inspire me to write a different kind of song, too. Or just being out in the world, seeing certain situations, the way people are living. Anything. I’m thinking of songs every day.

BLVR: When you won the Grammy for the No Doubt collaboration, a lot of people in Jamaica were pissed that you didn’t get to go onstage to accept it.

LS: Yes—like I wasn’t a part of it. I went on a few of [No Doubt’s] shows on tour, and I mashed it up. But then when it was time for the Grammys, my name wasn’t listed. I just got a certificate, not even the real Grammy. My people called the Grammy people, and the Grammy people said they got the information from No Doubt’s people, and No Doubt’s people said they put my name there—it was a whole runaround. So when they announced we won, I was getting up to go up there onstage with my manager at the time, but the damn security guy in the aisle was like, “Where you all going?” And we were like, “We just won, and we’re going to go up there.” But by then their speech was almost done, you know. Fat Joe was sitting right there. He was nice. He said, “Don’t worry, Mama, your time will come.” He said, “It’s all right, Mama.” He was very nice about it.

But I remember when Gwen did get up there, the first thing she said was, “Thanks to Lady Saw, and Sly and Robbie.” We’re cool—we been cool. I like her personally. She’s just a cool person. We were on tour and she’d be talking about how she wanted to have babies. Girl-to-girl talk, you know. She’s cool. We’ll do something again.

III. “THERE’S TWO SIDES TO ME, A LADY SAW AND A MARION HALL. AND I LOVE THEM BOTH.”

BLVR: To many people, Lady Saw is synonymous with slackness. Part of what makes your career and work so interesting, though, is all the work you’ve done that gives voice to Marion Hall, the woman behind the Queen of the Dancehall—and done so in different styles. In fact, your top seller ever is a country song—“Give Me the Reason.”

LS: Yes, I love that song. There was even some country artist in Nashville who covered it. You know, at the [Jamaica]

Jazz and Blues festival, they even put me on the bill as Marion Hall—a lot of people didn't know it was me. And I blew their minds, singing gospel, country. I gave them a taste of Lady Saw, but not the really raw Lady Saw, you know. People were telling the promoter, are you crazy putting her on like that? But there's two sides to me, a Lady Saw and a Marion Hall. And I love them both.

BLVR: How are they different? Do you separate from the Lady Saw people see in the dancehall when you're not onstage?

LS: You know, a friend of mine recently told me how she saw me onstage one night, and I came down off the stage, and a man said something to me. And I told him: "Lady Saw—she's done right now. That was Lady Saw there, she's done now. I'm Marion Hall, talk to me." Marion Hall is a homegirl. You see how hard it was to get me out? [*Laughs*] I stay home, you know? I don't have a lot of friends. I have a lot of fans, not so many friends. I stay home, I feed the dogs, I bathe the dogs. I have a farm up in Ocho Rios, I'm there. But I'm boring, you know—until it's time to touch the stage.

BLVR: A lot of people outside Jamaica don't know how popular country music is here. Did your own love of country come about because it's so popular in Jamaica, or out of your own innate love for the music?

LS: I grew up hearing it: Kenny Rogers, Dolly Parton, lots of people whose names I don't remember. There was a man in my town who always used to play country songs on his sound system. And then my father too—after he went away to America to do farmwork. He stayed up there, he was trying for the American dream. Hoping to bring all his kids up there. It didn't work; he never got his papers—his green card. He said a lot of people used him. He'd be up there doing work for someone, and they'd say he'd help him get his papers at the end, but when the end would be coming, they'd start acting funny. Anyway, he used to bring home music too.

One song I really love, that [Loretta Lynn] song [*singing*]: "You've come to tell me something you say I ought to know / That he don't love me anymore and I'll have to let him go / You say you're gonna take him oh but I don't think you can / 'Cause you ain't woman enough to take my man." And then here's the part I really like: "Women like you / they're a dime a dozen / you can buy 'em anywhere." [*Laughs*] That's gangster right there! She's singing, "For you to get to him I'd have to move over and I'm gonna stand right here / It'll be over my dead body, so get out while you can / 'Cause you ain't woman enough..." It's something I'd say in the dancehall, you know, that I'd sing about: "Bitch, don't be coming over here and trying to take my man." That's gangster; similar to some situations I might sing about here.

BLVR: Another of those songs that maybe falls on the Marion Hall side is "No Less than a Woman (Infertility)," which you wrote after your second miscarriage. You've said

that that was a song about that sad event, trying to deal with it—but also that it was “aimed at negative people in Jamaica who curse women who don’t have any kids.” I wonder if you could say what you mean by that—and how it was received at home.

LS: The song came about in part as a response to what some other people were saying. You know, people call me “Mumma” in Jamaica—the mother of dancehall. And there was one female in particular who was throwing words, singing about how Mumma can’t have a child; she’s the mother of dancehall but she can’t have kids. Calling me a mule. And I said to myself—I’m a great mom. I have three kids, I adopted them. I’m a great mom. And sometimes the worst moms are those who carried a child all the way [to term]. So I touch that topic. And when I perform it, people cry—I cry, men cry. Everyone. I had a man sitting next to me in business class on a plane, and he started talking to me about his experience, and how long he and his wife had been trying to have a child, and how my song touched them. And women come up to talk about their experiences. It was a topic that’s taboo in Jamaica—but it’s something I had to address.

I don’t hide anything about my life, I talk about everything. I talk about it—all kinds of things. I’ve done songs about bad experiences, a couple about growing up in the ghetto and being abused, sexually. Being raped. And I talk about it. And I have young girls come up to me with their stories, talking about how they want to kill themselves because some man just raped them. And I use my story to connect with them—to say I been through this. And it didn’t break me. So don’t ever talk about killing yourself. You’ll never see God’s face if you do.

Those are the topics I use to uplift women. I have another song called “Not the World’s Prettiest.” It’s about women who think they’re not beautiful because they weren’t born with a straight nose or brown skin. Girl, if you weren’t born with no smooth hair and you want it, go out and buy it! I buy it. It’s mine.

IV. “DOUBLE STANDARD IN THE BEDROOM”

BLVR: You’ve attracted some criticism for making some songs that don’t uplift women but degrade them. What’s your response?

LS: The boys used to say all kinds of things, talking about women’s vaginas, all kinds of rude things. And I didn’t like that. So I made songs like “Pretty Pussy”—it goes “Girl, put up your hand / you have the pretty pussy,” and I talk about how you dress the pussy or put a ring on it or take care of it. And the girls love that. It’s not degrading, or putting them down, it’s about uplifting them.

Now, there is another type of song—songs where I’m cussing a girl. You know, there will always be some situations where

women are cussing each other. And you know I'll cuss your ass out. There's a song I have called "Walk Out," about all these girls who like to walk up in your face, acting all crazy. And that song is saying, you know, if you walk up in my face, I'm going to slap you. So that's real. I do those kinds of songs. But those songs have their places. Every song has its time and place.

BLVR: The song of yours that maybe gets the most critique about being degrading to women, though, is "Stab Out the Meat."

LS: They say that one is degrading? I like it! I like the song.

BLVR: Some people say it's objectifying. But you know, there are those who have defended it on feminist grounds. Your friend Carolyn Cooper, for one, the leading dancehall scholar, wrote that it's alluding to women curing meat in the kitchen. I have to tell you—all due respect to the esteemed Professor Cooper—that I'm not sure I buy it. What do you say about that song today?

LS: Well, Carolyn may think that, but I know what I was thinking about when I wrote it. [Laughs] I didn't want to say, "Do it hard, have sex with me hard." So I say it different, just beating around the bush. All these boys are coming with "Cut it up, jack it up," all that. So I'm just saying, OK—come on, bring it. When a man's talking about he wants it hard, a woman's got to take it, and all that—that's OK, but it's not OK when I say I want it hard, keep it up so I can ride it? It's a problem? Please. Double standard in the bedroom.

BLVR: Which maybe brings up a larger point: that the violent mores of the dancehall are a reflection of this violent and sometimes messed-up country. That's a point you implicitly make in that brilliant song you wrote responding to people who call you "too slack" ("What Is Slackness"). You say, "Society a blame Lady Saw / fi di system dem create."

LS: "Wanna know what slackness is / I'll be the witness to dat.... Take the beam outa yu eye / Before u chat inna mi face / Cause slackness is when the road waan fi fix / Slackness when government break them promise / Slackness is when politician issue out gun / And let the two party a shot them one another down." That's right. I remember that mayor in Montego Bay was calling me the queen of slackness. So I was showing him, telling the government—another side of slackness that needs to be addressed. What the word really means. 'Cause I can control my slackness, you know? But there's so many other things—guns being issued out to youths in the ghettos, killing each other; suffocation and hardship; people can't get a job when they finish school. That's *slack*, that's the meaning of the word.

But you know what? Whatever. [Laughs] I'm famous because of my slackness.

BLVR: Do you ever find, though, that being the Queen of the Dancehall can limit what you want to do as an artist?

LS: Darling, you do anything you want when you're the queen. You do anything. I could go off and change, do more Marion Hall—but I'll always give them a little Lady Saw. If I start doing just Marion Hall, people would curse me out. They'd be like, what you doin' now, bring it. The MC would call me onstage and say, "We're going to welcome the Queen of Dancehall, the *queen*.... though lately she's been toning it down." And then I have to give it to them hard and say: "I still got it, baby. Don't be pushing me now."

[Joshua Jelly-Schapiro](#) is a doctoral student in geography at the University of California, Berkeley. He has written for publications including the *Guardian*, the *Nation*, and the *New York Review of Books*.

Illustration by Tony Millionaire

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