

# Shaggy Talks Seventh Grammy Nomination & Mainstream Acts Dabbling in Dancehall: 'It Makes Me Feel Like a Genius'

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"You don't make pop records in reggae," says Sting International, the legendary Brooklyn producer who's worked with dancehall hitmaker Shaggy since day one. "You make records and they go pop."

Not to be confused with Sting, the British rock star who collaborated with Shaggy on *44/876* -- which is nominated for Best Reggae Album at this weekend's GRAMMY Awards -- Sting International still remembers the first time he met the artist born Orville Richard Burrell. "I'm like, 'This guy is crazy. He's a little nuts, but he's got something.'"

He and Shaggy soon began recording underground anthems like "Big Up" featuring Rayvon and "Oh Carolina," the record that went straight to No. 1 on the U.K. charts, introducing Shaggy to the world and changing the dancehall game forever. That was 26 years ago, and Shaggy's remarkable career is still going.

This week the 50-year-old artist announced his 12th studio album, *Wah Gwaan*, to be released May 10 via The Cherrytree Music Company, Brooklyn Knights Entertainment and 300 Entertainment. Featuring collaborations with Jason Derulo and Nicky Jam as well as Shenseea and Noah Powa, *Wah Gwaan* is 12 tracks of classic Shaggy, a deft blend of dancehall and pop that's allowed him to rack up seven entries on the Billboard 200 albums chart, and eight singles on the Billboard Hot 100 -- including two No. 1s -- all of them written by Shaggy.

While hardcore Jamaican artists like Shabba Ranks and Super Cat paved the way, it was Shaggy who took the music of the Jamaican streets to the top of the charts. A former U.S. Marine and Gulf War veteran, Shaggy has become so ingrained in pop culture that he recently turned up as a question on the game show *Jeopardy!*. Few artists in the genre besides Sean Paul have been able to match his prolific output of hits. In an era when dancehall drives the pulse of pop music by international artists from Major Lazer to Drake, the man who helped create the blueprint is still in it to win it.

On Feb 10, 2019 Shaggy hosted the GRAMMY Awards Premiere Ceremony at Microsoft Theater in Los Angeles. Talking to *Billboard* before Grammys weekend, he shared his formula for making hits, spoke candidly about mainstream artists dabbling in dancehall, and addressed the challenges facing Jamaican artists in the streaming industry. He also opened up about his son, Florida rapper Robb Bank\$, who built a successful career without his knowledge, and explained why Mr. Boombastic finally decided to stop chasing respect and just do him.

"Let me just get myself situated here," says Shaggy, ordering a cup of mint tea with two sugars as he settles in for our conversation. "Some people take it straight, but I like the two sugars."

**I just gotta say I've been grooving to your song "Use Me" all morning. It's easy to listen to and kind of naughty.**

Thank you. It's more of a classic Shaggy. Somebody posted something yesterday and said, "Shaggy's got a new song. What year is this?" [*Laughs.*]

The new album has a lot of songs that are potential radio songs, chart hits or whatever. But you've gotta come with something that's disruptive. Something that lyrically stimulates someone to be like, "Oh my God! I can't believe he's saying this!" Which is why we had a massive hit like "It Wasn't Me." "Use Me" has that same thought-provoking vibe to it. When we were listening to the album, someone said "That song's gonna make every man hate you!" And I was like, "Perfect!"

With this album I noticed that there was a lot of girls and relationship-type of songs. And I was saying to myself, "Maybe I should do some other style of music, some other subject matters here and there." And then I'm like, "I'm Mr. Lover Lover-- so why not?"

**What's the point of reinventing the wheel?**

There's no point. I love all political undertones in the project with Sting and I. But I didn't want to do too much political stuff on this one. I just wanted to go back to that classic Shaggy.

Everybody can have different political views, everybody can have different religious beliefs. When it comes to relationships, it's really the same. It's either, you're banging, somebody you know is banging, or you wish you were banging. It's that simple. It's something that is relatable to everybody: black, white, young, old, straight, gay -- whatever. And it's not just sex. It's relationships. I might say some sexual shit on a record that's thought-provoking. I like to call it "Edutainment." You're being educated and entertained at the same time.

**You do have a few choice lines in "Use Me."**

Me talking about "Him can't satisfy you with the length" and all of that -- that's just the comedy of the song. The rest of the song is a deeper message: "Use me, baby, or I have no use." Everybody in their life needs to be used or they have no use. It's like that saying, "waste man." Nobody wants to be useless.

**Congratulations on an amazing album with Sting. I had the pleasure of coming to the NYC show of your tour.**

Which one did you see? The one where everybody got wet?

**Yes, on the rooftop at Pier 17. But the weather was not the only surprise. I have to be honest -- I don't think people knew what to expect at that show.**

Nobody did. That has been the biggest surprise of it. As well as we did with the tour, it could have done a lot better if people knew what they were getting. People thought we were just gonna perform the album. They didn't know we were going to be singing

each other's songs, and that it was going to be so intertwined and the chemistry was going to be that good.

**You both really seemed to be having fun. When you guys were on stage acting out the whole courtroom scene with you wearing the judge's outfit, it reminded me of the Prince Buster classic "Judge Dread." Was that your idea?**

No, actually that whole song was Sting. He is a very theatrical person. He's doing his play right now, *The Last Ship*. So when he came with this whole idea about "Crooked Tree," he was like "I want you to sing this part and this part." I just went ahead and did it, and it came out great. And we said it would be dope if we did it as a theatrical piece in the show. It's a little unorthodox and a little surprising, but that's kind of what this whole project is anyway. It's the "WTF." So why not just roll with that?

**It seems like people always gravitate to reggae -- whether they're a part of Jamaican culture or not. What do you think it is about reggae that everyone gravitates to?**

Reggae for me is a lifestyle, because that's what I was raised on. Right now I'm at my home in Kingston. I live it. But Jamaican music has changed over the years. I think reggae is in a good place. You've got people like Chronixx and that whole movement that are doing really well. I think they've been authentic with it, and they have done it justice.

Dancehall, in another sense -- the jury is still out on that. Because a lot of what is being done isn't really dancehall. It's a hybrid, which is so ironic. I was the "hybrid guy" for years, and I was criticized for that. They're doing the same hybrid that I did and now it's the norm of what is considered dancehall.

**How does that make you feel?**

It makes me feel like a genius. I'm like, "Yo, I must have foreseen this coming!" [*Laughs.*] The sound that they're doing is what I did for years, taking these R&B and pop chords and blending them with dancehall. It is certainly a movement, but not one that's sparked numbers yet. These are young kids with ideas, and you just have to rock until you find a sound that connects. So let them do their thing.

**Do you think roots music works better worldwide?**

I wouldn't say that the more rootsy sound has gone worldwide. If you sit down and count the amount of *Billboard* successes, it isn't roots reggae. For the last 20 years, any kind of *Billboard* success is really dancehall.

**You mean people like yourself and Sean Paul?**

Me, Sean Paul, Elephant Man, Wayne Wonder -- it's dancehall that has really pushed its head up. Mainstream artists from Justin Bieber to Rihanna, they're doing dancehall. The whole reggaeton movement comes from dancehall. It's just that for some reason where they are right now with it, it's just not resonating where numbers are concerned. There's a great dancehall following, but it's not big enough to be a force to be reckoned with.

## **What's the problem in your opinion?**

I think it's just a different time. People's attention is in so many places now. Streaming is so vast that people are doing outrageous things for likes and views. You might get those numbers because you do really crazy shit on Instagram, but that doesn't necessarily resonate with ticket buyers. You could have 4 million followers and you can't pack a venue of 500. I'd rather go for great songs that connect with people emotionally.

## **Rihanna is reportedly coming out with a dancehall album. Will that be good for the music?**

I think Rihanna could do a lot for the genre, but it could also backfire in a sense. Unless she's collaborating with core artists, it's gonna be rough for authentic dancehall artists to get a boost from that. Rihanna might open up other big names to say, "Hey, I'm going to do a dancehall record too!" But how does that really benefit the dancehall game? Unless they're collaborating -- but most of them aren't. They're just going ahead and writing their own hybrid dancehall. Because the hybrid sound that most of these [Jamaican] guys are on right now, it's not ours.

## **So that's why it can be so easily duplicated?**

By anyone. The only thing they won't be able to get is the language. Jamaican dancehall acts are speaking raw patois, so that might be a little difficult. But as far as the music part, they won't even need Jamaican producers to catch that flavor.

## **You've been signed to Virgin. You've been on MCA. You've been on Geffen. And now you're signed to 300.**

Every label that I've ever been signed to, I've had a hit. I was signed to Signet Records, where I had "Big Up Big Up" and all of those dancehall records. Then I got signed to Greensleeves, and then to Virgin. We had the *Pure Pleasure* album, the *Boombastic* album -- massive. When I came out with *Hotshot*, nobody knew what the hell it was. The record company didn't even want to promote it. They were like, "What is this?" But I ended up selling 10 million. So I am used to going against the grain. It really doesn't excite me unless it's like that.

I don't know if you noticed this: I'm conveniently dancehall. You know, when dancehall is getting a raw deal of being the music of violence, they're like, "No we're not -- Look at Shaggy!" [*Laughs.*] And whenever it's time to win a Grammy or an award, it's like, "Bwoy, how come Shaggy nominated? Him is not dancehall!"

I wanted to prove people wrong, so for a while I left pop music totally and went back to dancehall. The label dropped me because they said I wasn't cooperating. So I went on my own label, Ranch Records, and I did "Church Heathen" which was 19 weeks at No 1.

I put out the *Intoxication* album, which was another massive hit. But I noticed I wasn't doing any of the reggae festivals in Europe. My agent was like, "Well, the promoters are saying that you're not reggae enough. I'm not Jamaican enough."

## **Really?**

Oh yeah, you wouldn't believe these conversations that they are having. I've been getting a fight since day one. I've been reinventing myself for years, and it's all calculated. I sit down and think, "OK, how do I beat them now?" And I come up with these crazy ideas.

## **Why is that so important to you?**

Because it's a crab-in-the-barrel mentality. When you're winning, they're not gonna want to see win again. This is going back as far as Bob Marley. You got to remember, nobody played him in Jamaica. Bob Marley's popularity was after his death. They called him "the sellout guy," because he was doing "white people reggae," according to them. And now the hybrid music that they criticized him for has become the staple of what reggae music is. History is just repeating itself.

## **How does it make you feel, when people feel that way about you?**

It motivates me, because it makes me feel special in a sense. How is it that a 50-year-old artist somehow has the top-selling album, the top-grossing tour, and more streams than any of these guys? Understand how motivating that is! They can't get me out!

There's no way me at 50 years old should still be the guy to beat. I set the bar. My numbers are still the numbers to beat. I am leading them in streaming by huge numbers. I could easily go and do their dancehall game, but it does nothing for my pocket. It just does things for my ego. And even when I win, they still don't give me that. So as an artist, I got lost. I got caught up in trying to prove myself to people.

Until it dawned on me: "Why am I still trying to prove myself to these people?" That was a wake up call. And so I went back to doing what I do. I made "[I Need Your Love](#)," and got another big hit. I told myself, "I'm not going to watch any trends. I'm just doing Shaggy."

## **You still have a home in Jamaica, and you still seem so integrated in the culture. You do your charitable works and all that.**

I was born downtown Kingston, Rae Town. And I have a lot of ideas to develop Rae Town one day. But I'm not here glorifying my past: You won't hear me saying "I was a ghetto guy and I used to sell weed and do this and that."

I'm looking to uplift myself. When I have conversations with kids from the inner city, I tell them to aim for something higher. We should look at ourselves as kings. We should look at ourselves as being in that upper echelon. Yes. A ghetto guy with very little education did that. I made enough noise that the world had to stop and listen and take notice.

**Your son Robb Bank\$ is making music now, and he's doing really well too.**

He is. You know he has done so much without me knowing. I remember the first time I found out he was rapping he was well on the way. He kept it away from me for years. I didn't know who Robb Bank\$ was. I didn't know any of it.

So then I found out he was part of this whole crew, people like XXXTENTACION and Wifi and [Ski Mask the] Slump God and all of these people who are part of that Broward movement. They would be at my house in Coral Springs. I used to come in and see a bunch of kids hanging out in my driveway, and I'd be like, "Who the...? Pull your pants up!" [*Laughs.*] But these guys have now become stars. They're all part of a movement that they've created.

A lot has happened this year of course with the death of X. [Robb] is now doing an album with Wifisfuneral and putting out a lot of music. He's currently signed to Empire and he works very hard. He does a lot of music from my studio in New York, and some he does in Miami. We had a rough patch, him and I, for about two years. We didn't see eye to eye on a lot of stuff. That's just growing pains with kids. Now he's a little bit older and smarter and wiser, and we have regular conversations. And one thing I do like about him is his drive. He's very driven.

**Like father like son, I guess.**

Yeah. He'll go a long way because of his drive, I love that. He's a talented kid and he's a star. He walks into a room and lights it up. He has the ability to make everybody feel like they're the only person in that room. Look people in the eye. Be personable. Start up a conversation. And it'll take him a long way.

**You're up for your seventh Grammy nomination this weekend.**

Hopefully, fingers crossed we will win. In a perfect world it would be really great for us to release the new album *Wah Gwaan* after that. Leave it to the universe. Then we have a couple of singles that we're gonna put out after the Grammys.

**Shaggy won the Grammy!**