



Jah Joni

FOR REGGAE SINGER JONI AGUNG AND HIS
DOUBLE T BAND, THE MUSIC IS THE MESSAGE
AND THE MESSAGE IS THE MUSIC.

PHOTO: LUCKY 8
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JONI, how far back do your reggae roots go?

I wasn't always a musician. When I was a kid, my father bought me a guitar, but I just chucked it away because I was more interested in just playing in the waves and sand. My father was a Balinese dancer in Australia, and when he came back from Australia after I finished high school, he was very surprised to see me on the stage.

Do you remember the first time you heard reggae music?

Yes, it was around 1980. My father loved to go overseas, and one time he brought me back a cassette tape. He said, "listen to this" and I thought, "What's this?" I remember the album was called *Kaya*, and the only song that stuck in my head was *No Woman No Cry*. The other songs I didn't understand.

At that time I played rock 'n' roll, so I wasn't that interested in reggae, but I still kept listening to the tape. Then I met a guy from the Netherlands, originally from Suriname, and he said: "Listen to the music and listen to the message, because reggae is the music within the message and the message within the music." That resonated with me because my family and I have always been very spiritual.

After that I decided to make my own band and we agreed to pump reggae in Bali. We started playing in '87.

Was reggae popular in Bali at that time?

Not really. There was one reggae band called Legend. They were friends of mine but a bit older, and they played everywhere. But reggae was still not really popular. People thought, "what is this?" At that time head-banging was very popular in Bali, and only my friends and I were playing reggae. But we still managed to play at many rock concerts. I'm very lucky the audience didn't throw stones at me. They only just laughed and said, "what kind of music are you playing?"

So what made you want to keep going if people were laughing at you?

Because when you love something and feel good about something, you don't have to travel far from that. I made a commitment with my friends that we were going to keep reggae alive in Bali. I thought that even if I was not a great musician or songwriter, at least I could keep the music alive and keep on dreaming.

At that time were you writing your own songs?

No, not yet. We didn't have time to do original songs because our heads were too much into partying at night. You know how musicians are, right? We were so lazy to write the songs. At that time in Jakarta there were reggae bands doing their own original lyrics, but we were just giving the audiences what they wanted, and people wanted *No Woman No Cry* and that kind of stuff.

So how did the reggae scene in Bali progress?

Well, I remember when we first began to play reggae, nobody really knew what the music was all about. Then around 1990, reggae became really big all over the world. Soon after that we started to see the interest pick up and big reggae stars started coming to Bali.

Around that time, I had a friend who had a contract for a discotheque called Apache Bar. I really encouraged him to support reggae, but he didn't agree that you could be successful doing reggae all the time. He wanted to do reggae one night a week, one night for rock, one night for blues, and so on. We started doing reggae just two times a week, and on those nights the place was full every time. And on the other days, not so many people came. That's when my friend started to realise that we could do reggae all the time. He changed the name to Apache Reggae Bar, and it's still reggae every night to this day. I still play there every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Since then, the music has changed quite a bit. Now people are going back to the old styles, but combining them with new things. For example, you see a mix of reggae and ska and the rock steady thing. Artists today are mixing together different forms of music to make new sounds. This is great, because you can play reggae in any style as long as you don't lose the message.

Do you have a favourite place to perform in Bali?

I try to make every place I go my favourite. I'm learning to be more like traditional Balinese artists – even if they dance in the temple, a small alleyway, the rice field, they just dance like no one is watching and do everything for the gods.

Also, I've seen a lot of audiences and know that each one is unique in its own way. For example, I've played huge reggae festivals before with hundreds of people and many bands, but I've also played for just one person, and both experiences are good in their own way.

For example, after the bomb blast in 2002, no one was going to Legian Street, but I still came to Apache because we just wanted to play and make everyone wake up. The whole night, only one Japanese guy was in the bar, and he had one beer and one Coca Cola and then he slept on the bar. But I just played anyway.

Your band is unique in that you actually make songs in Balinese. What made you decide to do that?

The first time I heard reggae I didn't really understand English, but I did love the music. You know Jamaicans speak in patois, not only English. Also there is French reggae, German reggae and Japanese reggae. We decided to sing in Balinese because we believe in the concept that reggae is the music in the message and the message in the music. We were not so worried that non-Balinese people wouldn't understand it, because we figured that if they were curious they would ask.

When you listen to reggae from Jamaica, a lot of people sing about oppression, freedom from slavery and social issues. What about your songs?

For me, I write songs to help people wake up and realise themselves, where they live, what they give back to the earth and to other people. Not too much about sadness. It's more about trying to smile and be happy and have good energy. When Bob Marley was around, he wrote and sang about what he saw around him, but we don't really have those same issues here in Bali. We have a good place here.

Of course, some songs are a little bit critical of the government, but in a good way. I don't like to speak straight out; I prefer to use irony. Then if people listen to the music and the lyrics and they really like it, they will get it.

What's the most important message in your music?

Try to give love to everyone. We are one blood and we are sisters and brothers. Learn to give, because it's not easy. Sometimes the thing you give must be the thing you love, and sometimes that's hard to let go. So my message is to learn to give.

You have such a wide fan base to deliver your message to. What's it like being famous in Bali?

Nah - I don't think I'm famous. Some people say you have to sell this, do this, but that's not the point for me. Being famous was never our goal. You know we started reggae in Bali because we wanted people to be aware about the music, but it's more about what we have and what we share with people. For example, I teach yoga on the beach every morning, and everyone is welcome to join for free. Some people ask me why I don't take any money from people, but that's not the point. I'm just an ordinary person like everyone else. I just love to make music, do yoga and make friends all over the island.

So what's a typical day like for you?

Get up, do yoga, sometimes go fishing. Sometimes I swim in the ocean;

sometimes I nap on the beach. Then I go back home and chat with the family. Around noon I come back to the beach to clean the sand. The way I see it, cleaning this space is like cleaning my body and my mind. Some people say, "Keep Bali clean", but then they cut down the trees. They just act like that in front of the camera or yap on the TV, but I don't think that's right. Clean your own neighbourhood first. At first people were laughing at me because I'm a Balinese musician cleaning up the sand, but now they just follow. It's nice to see the area clean, you know?

You must have witnessed many changes in Bali over the years, an increase in pollution being just one of them. Are there any other changes that stand out for you?

Well, I remember I used to come to the beach and go diving for shells, clean the shells and then sell them to tourists on the beach. My friends and I also used to make replicas of traditional boats out of wood and sell those. It was easy to make money in those days, but not so much now. Now you have big tour and taxi companies, and the people who come here think that when they use them, they are helping out the people of Bali, but really they don't know or realise where the money goes. Usually it goes back to Jakarta or overseas and not to the people here. That's what I'm fighting for. I tell my friends to make good prices for tourists, and try to be good friends with everyone, smile and be friendly not because they want to make money, but because it comes from their heart. Then people will want to support the Balinese community.

What can we expect from Joni Agung and the Double T Band in the future?

We've already sent our new album off to Jakarta, so that will be out on CD soon. This will be our fourth album and it's the first album where we mix Balinese, English and Indonesian. We've put in a little bit of what everyone will like. I think before we were a bit selfish, so now it's time for us to give more of what people want.

As for me, I just want to stay and live strong, continue doing yoga and continue to spread the message through music. I'll be doing reggae until I cannot sing any more, because really there is no retiring from what you love in life. Maybe in 20 years if I cannot stay out late, I'll play early. If I cannot play seven days a week, I'll play just two or three times a week or even once a week. But really, I play all the time. Even if I'm just meeting friends we sing and play guitar together just because we love it.

Final words?

Whatever happens in the future, one thing I'm not worried about is Balinese people losing our culture and religion, because our culture is strong like a giant tree root. We came across from Java in the 13th and 14th centuries because we wanted to preserve our religion, so we will never lose that. No matter what kind of music we play or how many big companies come in, nobody has to worry about the Balinese because we are strong. ●