

# Lucky Dube

## Respect

Story and photography  
by Lee Abel

*"Bob Marley said,  
'How long shall they  
kill our prophets while  
we stand aside and  
look' But little did he  
know that eventually  
the enemy will stand  
aside and look while  
we slash and kill  
our own brothers  
knowing that already  
they are the victims of  
the situation"*  
- Victims (1993)

Delivered by his grandmother on a farm near the small mining town of Ermelo on August 3, 1964, he wasn't given a name. He wasn't expected to live. But like every other challenge, save one, that was to follow in his 43 years, he refused to be a



victim. The apartheid system in South Africa provided little opportunity for proper health care, quality education or employment. Its rigid laws cruelly dictated the movements of blacks. Furthermore, his father had a liquor habit and abandoned the family before he was born. His mother Sarah left shortly after to seek domestic work in Johannesburg, hoping to send money back, rarely able to. He stayed behind in the mud hut, his beloved grandmother caring for him, nourishing him, body and soul.

At six months, the boy – the very lucky-to-be-alive boy – was finally given a name, Lucky Phillip Dube. He stayed with his grandmother, perhaps the single most influential person in his life. She would often go days without food, making sure Lucky and his siblings ate. When things became desperate, they would sneak and collect sheep droppings from a neighboring farm to boil up into some meager sustenance. At five, Lucky had already learned the lesson of responsibility. He began working as a gardener for white families so that his own family would have a little food. He quickly saw that his employers treated their dogs better than him. When he was a little older he was terrorized by a pair of hounds while their owners laughed. More physical pain would come at the hands of one of his employers who intimidated him into receiving several high-voltage shocks in a sadistic experiment with a new toy.

At eight he began attending school and continued working off-hours. He had to get up at five o'clock every morning and walk nearly nine miles. Often he went the whole day without food in order to get an education. As a library assistant, he discovered an entry on Rastafari in the encyclopedia that was to make a lot more sense to him when he later discovered reggae music coming out of Jamaica. Jimmy Cliff was the artist most well known to South Africans at that time, because his non-threatening music was played on the radio. The more revolutionary music of Marley and Tosh was underground, much of it banned. If caught with one of their cassettes, your health and freedom were on the line. Lucky listened whenever he could.

**Top: 2002 – Palo Alto, CA**

**Left: Sunsplash U.S.A. Tour '92 – Berkeley, CA**

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In high school Lucky moved to his uncle's, where his home life continued to be harsh, yet he was making creative strides at school. He joined one of the choirs and soon stepped into the role of choirmaster when the teacher assigned to it lost interest, leading them to a third-place victory in a multi-school competition. He organized his first band, The Skyway Band, and "borrowed" instruments from a teacher until they were discovered practicing and the instruments locked away. At 18 he moved again, this time to his aunt's house where he finally found both sustenance and kindness. His cousin Richard Siluma, 10 years his senior, began to mentor Lucky. Richard was in a band called the Love Brothers that played a traditional Zulu music called mbaqanga. Recognizing Lucky's vocal talent, Richard accepted him into the band. A remarkable success story on his own, Richard had worked up the ranks at Teal Records (later known as Gallo).

As a record producer, Richard recorded Lucky's first album *Lucky Dube and the Supersoul* (1982), on which Lucky sang but did not write. By his third album, Lucky was financially comfortable and was working on proficiency in English in order to communicate his message to a wider audience. Reggae became the vehicle for these messages, with lyrics reflecting the anguish of daily life in South Africa as well as the uplifting spiritual vocabulary of the Rastafarians. He was particularly influenced by the militancy of Peter Tosh's music and the stark similarities between oppression of blacks in Jamaica and those in institutionally racist South Africa. He began adding these songs to his concerts and they were enthusiastically received. The concerts were getting longer and included a mbaqanga set and a reggae set. It was clear early on that Lucky was a dynamic, high-energy performer who enjoyed jumping into the crowd and running around the venues while he sang. Richard, who had first seen Jimmy Cliff in 1976, felt the time was right and encouraged his cousin to do a reggae album.

**Top: Sunsplash U.S.A. Tour '92, Backstage - Berkeley, CA**

**Bottom: Slim's 1993 - San Francisco, CA**

After five chart-topping mbaqanga albums, Lucky and Richard went into the studio in 1984 and recorded *Rastas Never Die*. The South African Broadcasting Corporation banned it from airplay. The album bombed. The record company was not happy. The semi-autobiographical film *Getting Lucky*, complete with a Lucky Dube mbaqanga soundtrack, had come out and Teal didn't want to lose their mbaqanga star to an unpopular musical genre. Never to be deterred, the duo tried again the following year. In 1985 "Think About the Children" began to sell and Lucky's reggae career was set. "Think About the Children" later transformed into one of his well-known hits, "Born to Suffer," in which he clearly expressed his concern for those children, like himself, who grow up without a parent.

Before moving on to more reggae projects, Lucky and Richard had one more detour. They recorded a satirical Zulu/rap album in Afrikaans, *Help My Krap* (meaning "Help Me Scratch"), under the pseudonym of Oom Hansie ("Uncle Hans"). It was a success as well and Lucky added a third set to his shows. Careful to conceal his identity, he wore a variety of disguises. Eventually he had to stop out of sheer exhaustion and fear for his safety from the surging crowds trying to unmask him.



In 1987, apartheid was strong, civil unrest was increasing and Lucky was back in the studio making his strongest statement yet, a seven-track album, simply entitled *Slave*. David Segal, a white, Jewish South African, was brought in and became Lucky's lifelong engineer and friend. The title track spoke to the evils of alcoholism, including the lyrics, "I'm a slave, just a liquor slave." Many heard "legal slave" instead of "liquor slave." This, coupled with Lucky naming his backing band "The Slaves," elevated him to a messenger of social and political change. The album was a wild success, selling over 500,000 copies. Lucky Dube and the Slaves now played all-reggae shows to cheering fans of over 50,000 in South Africa, and began what would become a lifetime of international touring.

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**"Too many people Hate apartheid  
Why do you like it? Hey you Rasta  
man, Hey European, Indian man  
We've got to come together as one"  
- Together As One (1988)**

Lucky had a vision of a colorblind society. Hurt by the injustices heaped on him by the apartheid system, he was not bitter. Instead, he sought solutions through his lyrics and in the process, risked his life to tell the truth. At a time when to sing the word "apartheid" was dangerous, let alone to criticize the government, Lucky became the first black artist played on a white radio station, with the initially banned, *Together As One* title track.

*Prisoner*, the next album, sold over a million copies. Alongside themes of personal responsibility (education and crime in "Prisoner") and aching loss (abandonment in "Remember Me"), Lucky continued to lambaste the government.

*Captured Live* (1990) was his only live album, followed closely by *House of Exile*. In *Exile's* title track Lucky sings, "Freedom fighter standing on a mountain... All he dreams about is the freedom of the nation, when every man will be equal in the eyes of the law." The freedom fighter is Nelson Mandela, whose name could not be mentioned at that time in South Africa and the mountain is Robben Island, the infamous prison used to isolate opponents of apartheid. Also on this release is a deeply personal song Lucky would go on to sing with Peter Gabriel nightly when they toured together in 1993. The song "It's Not Easy" was about his painful divorce after a short year of marriage. As he told me years later, "I had a shitty childhood; I didn't want to have a shitty marriage." Lucky also played on Gabriel's first American WOMAD festival in 1994.

On July 17, 1991, Lucky Dube, dressed in fatigues and military boots, bounced on to the stage of the world's premier reggae festival, Sunsplash Jamaica. Backed by the always tight Slaves, complete with

**Top: Sunsplash 1991 - Jamaica**

**Bottom: Slim's 1995 - San Francisco, CA**

horn section and a gorgeous trio of female singers (comparisons to the I Threes duly noted), he immediately commanded the respect of both the crowd and the promoters. His voice was silky smooth, ranging effortlessly from baritone to falsetto. While the music was roots reggae, the dance was more of a South African mbaqanga, and involved choreographed moves with the singers and band members. The Jamaicans loved him and demanded the only encore of the show. He would play Sunsplash again in 1992, following the Sunsplash U.S.A. tour. Not until 2007 did Lucky again accept an invitation to perform in Jamaica, this time for the Cricket World Cup Opening Ceremonies.

It was not easy for a South African musician to tour overseas given the embargo on the country in those waning days of apartheid, but he overcame obstacles barring his travel and continued dazzling crowds and selling albums. *Victims* (1993), the last album released before the African National Congress was voted to power, sold over a million copies. With the country's first one person/one vote election pending, and a high illiteracy rate among the new voters, Lucky took time out to visit farms and help educate his people

on how to read and mark the ballots. More than once he had to run for his life when an angry landowner, gun in hand, disapproved of his services.

With Nelson Mandela finally in office, it was time to lighten up...just a little bit. *Trinity*, released in '95, contained the hit "Feel Irie," which was Lucky's way of rejoicing after all his country had been through. He also urged people to take responsibility for their lives.

**"The way to get our  
economy strong is  
to have an educated  
nation And if you think  
affirmative action is the  
way out No way...  
no way"**

**- Affirmative Action  
(1995)**

With the release of *Serious Reggae Business*, a compilation of 10 years of hits, Lucky won Best Selling African Recording Artist at the World Music Awards in Monte Carlo in 1996. It was one of the over 20 national and international awards Lucky received during his lifetime.

The ANC was firmly in power, but Lucky did not



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stop criticizing the system. If he saw injustice or incompetence, he wrote about it, no matter the color of the perpetrator, no matter the consequence to himself. On "Taxman," he complained of where his taxes go when "there is so much crime in the street." And in "Guns & Roses," another song off *Taxman* (1997), he bemoaned tribalism:

**"One time we were judged by the colour of our skin Now we are judged by the colour of our flags Let us unite against being divided"**

Lucky's music continued to mirror the concerns of Africans, and no song is more telling than the prophetic "Crime and Corruption" off *The Way It Is* (1999):

**"Do you ever worry about your car being taken away from you In broad daylight Down highway 54 Do you ever worry about your wife becoming The woman in black Do you ever worry about leaving home and Coming back in a coffin With a bullet through your head?"**

At this point in his career, Lucky was much more popular outside his country than in it. While his music was rarely heard on the radio there, he was considered nearly a god in other African countries and his fan base continued to grow globally. On the title track to *The Other Side* (2003), Lucky takes us on a trip between Jamaica and Soweto to point out the irony between Jamaicans who want to return to the motherland and South Africans who want to run away to the West.

After panties were thrown on stage during Lucky's 2002 Reggae on the River set, I asked him, "How come people throw marijuana on the stage for the other artists and panties for you?" With a shy smile and a twinkle in his eye, he said, "Maybe that's because they know I don't smoke."

**Top: Playing backstage at Reggae on the River 2002**

**Bottom: Last Tour - September 9, 2007 - Santa Cruz, CA**

Viewed as a Rasta by many, Lucky did not rest easy with that definition. For him, Rasta was not about smoking herb or flashing dreadlocks, it was about consciousness on a social, political and personal level. It was about fighting the system with words and music, and living upfully. He did not believe in the divinity of Haile Selassie. Eventually he was drawn to the prophet Isaiah Shembe, and became one of the most notable members of the Nazareth Baptist Church. The Shembe Church is uniquely African, merging traditional Zulu custom and dress with ancient Christianity, creating a modern messianic movement. With typical humor, Lucky wrote me in 2005, "We went to church today and I got a big fright when they said, 'TODAY'S SERVICE WILL BE DONE BY MR. DUBE FROM BEGINNING TO END.' I looked around even though I knew I am the only Dube there. BUT I spoke okay I guess. They did not stone me or walk out while I was talking."

Lucky's mission in life never changed - it was to educate, entertain and unite. Playing on the Johannesburg stage at Live 8 ("Global Call to Action Against Poverty" benefit in 2005) was a perfect venue for him. In 2006, his last album of original material carried the mission forward. He wrote to me saying, "There is a song there that talks about, well, politicians. When it is time to vote, they go to people's homes, shake hands with the elders, kissing and holding little babies, you know the shit, and then they disappear. There are a lot of unfulfilled promises here and a lot of unhappy people who even threaten

not to vote on our upcoming local government elections. ONE MONSTER DIES, ANOTHER ONE COMES ALIVE." *Respect* is the most intricately crafted of all his releases, fusing classic reggae with African rhythm and soul, over lyrics that are poignant, cautionary and hopeful. We hear pure joy when he tells us to "Celebrate Life," thankfulness in "Shembe Is the Way," and frustration with "Political Games." Above all, we hear his parting wisdom on the title song. As he said on his last tour in September 2007, "You cannot love somebody if you don't respect them. So even if we don't agree with certain things in life, if we respect each other, everything will be cool."

Lucky returned home to his family and his country on September 13, 2007. He was murdered five weeks later, on October 18, ostensibly for his luxury Chrysler. Two of his teenage children were with him as he stopped in front of his brother's house



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in a quiet Johannesburg suburb and four men approached the car. The worldwide outpouring of grief and anger has been staggering. Was it simply a crime or was it an assassination? We may never know, but think about this: Peter Tosh was Lucky's biggest reggae influence. Both were outspoken critics of the "shitstem." Both were killed by bullets at close range at the age of 43, by their black countrymen. Nothing was taken from either of them.

***"Rastas never die  
Reggae music never dies"***  
– Rastas Never Die (1984)

Lucky brought vibrancy to everything he did. A courageous freedom fighter and electrifying performer with an incredible octave range, poignant lyrics, flawless arrangements and great body moves,

***Last Tour – September 9, 2007 – Santa Cruz, CA***

Africa's Reggae King was markedly different off stage – low key, soft spoken, even shy with those he didn't know, he was also compassionate, witty, funny and engaging. He loved children and the deepest loss of all is that his children will grow up without his earthly love and guidance.

My hope is that this beautiful man did not die in vain, that the final brutality he suffered will compel us to open our hearts and listen to his soul's music, and to take action to make this world a better place for all its children.



To my down-to-earth friend who never wore bling but treasured his cars, and took his last breath in one of them: May your spirit dance in peace and may all those who loved you find solace, hope and joy in your life well lived. ☺

*Lee Abel has been photographing reggae artists since the 1980s. She helped bring Lucky Dube to the forefront of American, Jamaican and international audiences by placing his images on covers and in articles of Reggae Report, the premier all-reggae magazine of the 80s and 90s. Lee was privileged to have photographed Lucky Dube on 17 occasions between 1990 and 2007, including his final American show, September 12, 2007, in San Francisco. See more of Lee's work at [www.reggaeportraits.com](http://www.reggaeportraits.com) or contact her at [leeabel@mindspring.com](mailto:leeabel@mindspring.com).*