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## Whatcha Gonna Do?

Houston's Neutral Sisters look white, sing black and move to a reggae rhythm

BY JOHN NOVA LOMAX

[john.lomax@houstonpress.com](mailto:john.lomax@houstonpress.com)



*From Africa to England, England to Jamdung /*

*Next ting you know we inna Houston —*

**“Live & Direct,” the Neutral Sisters  
Kyra and Bianca**

For bookings and more information:  
**Moshows.com**  
713-521-0900 • 800-546-0540  
[neutralsisters@moshows.com](mailto:neutralsisters@moshows.com)

For Houston reggae act the Neutral Sisters, this gig in Jamaica promised a tough crowd. This was not your typical Jamaican reggae festival slot their manager Pele Lanier had gotten them, not a hedonistic spring break shindig for North American college kids. This was Tony Rebel's Rebel Salute — a true red, black and green Rastafarian gathering. In keeping with the dictates of the religion, alcohol was forbidden on the grounds, and food vendors offered no meat — only fruit, fish and vegetables. Festgoers slept in hammocks. Dreadlocks were de rigueur.

And on the night the Neutral Sisters performed, great clouds of high-grade ganja vapors hung over the 12,000 fans who had already arrived, who were eager to get past this unknown act and on to the next, who happened to be Bob Marley's son Damian, a.k.a. the Grammy-winning Junior Gong.

This was the sight that greeted sisters Bianca and Kyra Noons — two white-skinned young ladies — when they took the stage. Imagine the butterflies in their stomachs. And imagine what the thousands of Rastas thought when they saw the Neutral Sisters.

“That's the response we get from nearly everybody when we walk out,” says Bianca in a faint Jamaican accent. “They're like, ‘What are they coming with?’”

“You could have heard a pin drop,” says their ebullient father/manager, Tony Noons, who speaks like Sir David Frost and looks something like an older Bob Marley minus the dreads. “It was unbelievable silence. They didn't know what those white girls were doing on the stage.”

Until they opened their mouths, and a perfect Jamaican patois two-part harmony came flying forth over a haunting, hypnotic dub backing.

*All in de image of a gangsta / whatcha gonna do?*

“The whole place roared, man,” says Tony. “Incredible! Absolutely phenomenal!”

That's why they're called the Neutral Sisters. They don't identify with any country or any race. They were born in Kenya, to a white Jamaican mother and a black English father. (Who both live in Houston now, though they are divorced.) They spent their childhoods in Kenya, London and Jamaica, and went to high school in Houston and the Hill Country. And though they look white, could easily, as the term goes, “pass,” they don't consider themselves white.

"One of the funniest things in America was going to school," says Kyra, an extroverted 27-year-old brunette and the elder sister by 18 months. We're sitting in the family's unofficial headquarters, a huge Museum District loft in an ornate low-rise, the home of Tony Noons and his brother Philip. For the time being, it's also the home of Kyra, her fiancé and their two children while Kyra's house is being renovated. Bianca lives with her mother. Tony Noons serves Kenyan and Russian tea in china cups. Incongruously, there is a tattered relic of the Texas Revolution on the wall, a framed "Come and Take It" flag that Philip says was lent to him as security on a debt.

"The first ting you got here was 'What are you?' When you are coming from England and Jamaica," and here Kyra's fairly faint Jamaican accent again becomes very pronounced, "ya are what ya are. If ya brown, ya brown, if ya yella, ya yella, if ya red, ya red. So I come over here and they ask me what I am, I say, 'My father's black and my mother's white.' So they say, 'Oh, you're black.'"

"But we have all different cultures — Irish, Scottish, African, Jamaican, English, whatever," says Bianca, a lithe 25-year-old blond who works as an accountant by day. Bianca is more introverted than her sister, and her Caribbean lilt is less pronounced than her sister's, though she can also turn it up about ten notches whenever she wants.

"I had a problem with my geography teacher at Bellaire," she remembers. "We had to choose a race on this sheet. I filled out white *and* I filled out black. She said I had to choose one. I was like, 'You cannot tell me to choose one.' And there was no 'other,' so I wrote 'other.' She said that wasn't going to work — the rules say you have to choose one, but I said, 'This is what I am.'"

"Everything that we had to go through helps explain the name of our group," says Kyra. "We've had instances where we go places where we're not accepted because we are not this color fully or that color fully — we're in the middle. Or there are places where you can just go everywhere — once people know you, once I tell people that I'm Jamaican, they're like, 'Oh, okay.'"

Rebel Salute was a Rastafari-type show," says Kyra (pronounced "KEE-ra"). "There was only one white American Rasta guy on the bill, and he was comin' with his own vibe. Everybody could see that he was American. But us? No, we don't fit that bill, because we are genuine with what we come with. Everything that comes out of our mout's — you know that we are not fakes, that we are not trying to put on, that we are not wannabes. No! It's just that you can't put us in a box — you can't look at us and say, 'Well, they belong *here*.'"

So far, the Neutral Sisters are something of an unknown quantity outside of Jamaica and Houston's southwest-side reggae scene, but now they're starting to gig inside the Loop at clubs such as Fitzgerald's, the Engine Room and Brian O'Neill's. Their debut CD, featuring the work of legendary Jamaican rhythm section Sly & Robbie and the equally esteemed guitarist Ernie Ranglin, is set to come out next month. Three years ago, they won the *Billboard* Song Contest pop category with that album's title track, "Live & Direct."

Two African-born, white-skinned Jamaican sisters leading a reggae band is something new, and it would be easy to write them off as a novelty act until you hear them. Bianca's raps, Kyra's elegant alto, the seamless harmonies and sharp lyrics elevate them out of that ghetto. The song is good enough to garner heavy rotation on XM Radio's reggae show *The Joint*, and for the DJ on that show, their appearance means nothing.

But whether they can attain widespread fame in America is questionable. Unlike its raucous ancestor ska, reggae seldom breaks through to the mainstream here, exceptions like Houston's own Johnny Nash ("I Can See Clearly Now"), Bob Marley and Jamaican rappers Shinehead, Shaggy and Sean Paul notwithstanding.

But who knows? Houston's undergoing something of a reggae renaissance. Perhaps new homegrown reggae bands Dubtex and Sound Patrol, both of whom the sisters have played with, are laying the foundations for something more. Meanwhile, on the southwest side, the Jamaican and hip-hop communities flock to shows at places like Royal Hall, Paradise Hall and the Jubilee Saloon to see Jamaican big-name acts, many of whom tour here.

When speaking with the Noons family, you hear a lot of talk about fate and the will of the Almighty. They truly believe that next month's release of *Live & Direct* is going to be a life-changing event, and it just might happen. They've lined up national distribution through local company Clout Distribution, there are big names backing the tracks, and the women's songs have a pop/hip-hop sheen and positive and empowering messages lying over the top of some extremely solid roots-reggae grooves. Their crossover appeal has already stood them in good stead — when "Live & Direct" won the *Billboard* Song Contest, it was in the pop category, not reggae — and their sound could appeal to anyone from 12 to 50 and up. (That same song finished in the top four in the world category in the John Lennon Songwriting Contest.)

Already Beyoncé and company have confirmed a gig at Jamaica's Sumfest this year. The only other

American act on the bill just might be the Neutral Sisters — it's in negotiations.

Even if they resist the association, it's sure to come up again and again. A song like their "So You Say" reminds one of an island version of "Independent Women." *It's time for you to make up your mind and seize control of your life*, Kyra sings, while Bianca raps behind her Jamaican-style in a surprisingly deep voice. *Or you will be just let go of / 'Cause you really love me / So you say / And you really need me / So you say...Think twice before you lose something you can't have back.*

The sisters do sound a lot like Beyoncé in their postmodern feminism. "We're gonna speak straight about reality, but we're gonna put it in a perspective that there's always a way to get the best outcome out of whatever situation," says Kyra. "We want to be a strength to young women, and to young men, but you see a need for it more with women because there is so much exploitation of women on the whole. When you're a young woman you need something that is cool and hip and also can be a positive influence in your life and the decisions you make."

"We want people to be able to think about us in a number of different ways," adds Bianca. "It's not just one way."

"We're not judgmental — we're just putting things out there," says Kyra. "There are different options."

"Yeah, there's no, like, 'You have to' or 'This is the way it is,'" Bianca agrees.

"It's just a matter of thinking about what is going to happen, what the repercussions are," Kyra adds. "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. You can have a melody that's great, but why not have the words be something that will help you stay positive through bad times? And let it be mainstream at the same time? We don't want it labeled as a Christian act or something like that."

During the Great Depression, Tony Noons's father immigrated from Jamaica to England, where he settled in Birmingham, a sprawling red-brick metropolis in the West Midlands, and married a local woman. Birmingham was long the most diverse city in England outside of London, a teeming melting pot of Afro-Caribbeans, West Indians, Irish and working-class English. From the late 1960s onward, Birmingham and its outlying towns have periodically contended with more famous rivals such as London and Manchester as the hottest musical city in the UK. It was the hotbed of the English ska and reggae scenes, and classic rock staples Traffic and ELO are from the area, as were the primary architects of heavy metal: Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath.

As a young man, Noons was on the fringes of this ferment. "We all knew each other on the scene," he remembers. "Steve Winwood, Ozzy Osbourne, Jimmy Capaldi..."

Noons was working as a booking agent for a few of the bands, and one such was a group called Listen, which featured a shaggy, blond-haired singer named Robert Plant.

"One day we were trying to figure out how to get him some publicity," Noons remembers. His accent is cultured and betrays none of the braying vowels of the Ozzy-style "Brummie" dialect. "And I had just bought a bunch of velvet material for curtains. He had a court date coming up in a couple of days' time, and I thought, 'Why don't we just dress him up in an outrageous costume, and we'll get all his friends to hold banners and circle the court on the day?' So we made this velvet King John outfit, and the magistrate refused to hear the case, and it made the national news."

"We helped get him his first publicity," Noons says. "And the rest is history."

Soon enough, Noons was history on that scene as well. A girlfriend tipped him off about an upcoming local audition for the national traveling company of *Hair*, and Noons — whose only training came in school plays and church choir performances — and another local by the name of Joan Armatrading beat out hundreds of other competitors to get parts.

After *Hair*, Noons moved to Paris, where he performed in cabarets. In his off-hours one night, Noons was relaxing in Place Clichy, where he met Valerie, who became the mother of their four children. After a stint back in London, the newlyweds planned to move somewhere more exotic. Some Brazilian friends were urging them to move to Rio, but other pals had an even better offer.

"Being of mixed race, I knew that at some point I would have to go to Africa," Noons says. Tony and Valerie moved to Kenya, where they first owned a boutique, and later got into the safari business. Noons worked as a tour manager, picking up American and European tourists at the Nairobi Airport, dropping them off at their hotels, and then picking them up and driving them out to places like the Serengeti, the Ngorongoro Crater and Lake Manyara. Tony and Valerie stayed for five years, and it was there that Kyra and Bianca were born.

The Noons girls hardly remember Kenya. "I'll see pictures and I'll have a certain feeling," says Kyra. "It's more like *knowing*, and only remembering to an extent."

"The Masai just loved Kyra with her [then] golden locks," remembers Tony. "They would sit her on their knee — there was that contact. We had a breakdown outside of Amboseli Game Reserve. It was getting late. A Masai taxi driver pulled up in his Peugeot car packed with lots of passengers. It was about 7:30 at night, and we were stranded, literally. And this guy hooked up our Volkswagen combi and towed us 150 miles into Nairobi. And I asked why he would stop for us when nobody else would. And he said, 'Because of your daughter.' She certainly saved our bacon that day."

When the girls approached school age, the Noons family moved back to London, where they welcomed two new additions: sons Daniel and Luke. Tony also got back into the music scene, managing a hard rock band called Money. When that fizzled, Noons had a new idea. Why not open a safari company in Jamaica? "I had the experience," he explains, "and that was Valerie's home."

Until they moved to Jamaica, Kyra and Bianca had shown only a slightly above average interest in music, and no special talent. Kyra says that she did learn two entirely different approaches to singing in England and Jamaica. "Most of our singing started in school," she says. "In England, choir was part of the curriculum. Jamaica, too, but there it was no big deal. Nobody ever concentrated on if you were any good — it was just 40 of us in our school uniforms. The teacher would be like" — here she adopts a matronly voice — "'Sing, girls!' But in England at Christmastime you would get in these big churches and it was just amazing how it sounded. All the different parts coming together."

Kyra says that what she learned in English choirs is a key component in the Neutral Sisters' intricate harmonies. "That's why when we build our harmonies you get all kinds of things."

Still, they had shown no signs of developing careers in music, until one night when Tony was unwinding on their veranda with a drink. "Bianca walked out and said, 'Dad, listen to this,' and started to sing. I knew they were doing choir and stuff like that, but I was very impressed. I said, 'Wow! That's really good.' And she asked if I wanted to hear another one and sang that, too. I told her I hadn't heard any of them, and then she pulled out a notebook of lyrics of all the songs she had written. And I read through them and I thought, 'Wow, that's fantastic — besides having great voices, the girls are writing their own music,' and the melodies were fantastic."

Shortly after discovering their talents, the girls left Jamaica one after the other. Tony says that there is a huge decline in the quality of Jamaican education

between junior and senior high school, so the girls were packed off to live with Valerie's relatives, who had moved to Texas.

"My relatives were in a transitional time when I came over here, so I got to experience several different high schools," says Kyra. "I was at Clear Lake, New Braunfels, Canyon Lake, and I came back and graduated from Bellaire. That was the year Bianca came to America."

"Being Jamaican in America was a huge culture clash," says Bianca, who attended Westbury. "My aunt just kind of dropped me off — it was a *huge* school."

It's somewhat surprising, but Bianca says that New Braunfels, her first port of call, was an easier place to overcome culture shock than cosmopolitan Houston. "It was mountainous and outdoors," she says. "I was able to go outside and hike with my uncle."

Bianca got into hip-hop in Houston and learned deejaying. She was still filling notebooks with songs. Kyra was still singing, too.

Six years ago, the ladies found a little Jamaican oasis in Houston called Yard Sound Studios, a reggae recording studio run by Orville Adams. Adams is the nephew of Jamaican piano legend Aubrey Adams and a veteran of Houston reggae 1980s mainstays the Yard Band. He's also the bass player in the Neutral Sisters, Kyra's fiancé and the father of their daughters, Sadé and Jade.

Adams was eager to work with Bianca, but their wires got crossed in a mix-up over her work phone number. Months later, the two crossed paths again, whereupon Bianca greeted him with the same patois howdy. "I told her to come back and start working in the studio, and she looked at me and said, 'I've a sister. She sings.' And I said, 'What? *Two* white girls? Dis a gold mine, man!' So she brought Kyra in. I was thinking, 'Two sisters, Jamaican vibe, everything right.' I didn't even know dey were from Africa, because they were talking Jamaican just *raaawww*! So they come and they did a song, 'Live & Direct.'"

The demo wasn't the only product to come from this session. Two daughters and an impending marriage also came about. "Me and Kyra really clicked togedda really close, ya know?" Adams says, smiling shyly. "When I saw Kyra and we started to vibe in the studio, we just come togedda like one."

*It's a hard, hard world / trouble and strife / hold your head high / Jah-Jah will provide.* — "Be Strong," the Neutral Sisters

When the family's old friend Pele Lanier, the veteran

reggae manager and force of nature, heard the demo, she knew she had a new client on her hands. Lanier was a legendary behind-the-scenes figure in reggae circles, an African-American Rastafarian woman who wore magnificent African gowns and hair wraps. Female managers are somewhat rare in all genres of music, and the exceptions to the macho rule usually have to overcompensate à la the rough-and-tumble, foulmouthed Sharon Osbourne. Lanier — who managed the dub poet Mutabaruka, among others — took instead a regal, magisterial approach, and was instrumental in raising the status of women in reggae and the international status of reggae in general. Every year she would attend the MIDEM conference in Cannes, the world's largest independent music convention, and preach the gospel of reggae.

"She was the epitome of elegance," says Tony. "She gave off an air of African royalty."

"She heard 'Live & Direct' and got on board," says Tony. "She took the song to MIDEM and we got a big article in the French press. The Africans that were there heard it and found out they were from Kenya; they said, 'They're African! They're ours! We've got to have this girls!' There was an immediate identification. The South Africans and Nigerians wanted them to come do videos, but we told them we would come when the album was ready."

"So that was all Pele. And she was working with us to get us some gigs and such, including the one at Rebel Salute. She was courting the record labels on our behalf — Sony, all the labels. And then she came up here, visited with the girls, and everything was hunky-dory. I kissed her good-bye at the first-class lounge — she always traveled first-class."

Tony didn't have a clue that he would never see Lanier again. "All of a sudden she dropped out of the scene. I couldn't work it out. All of a sudden she wasn't answering the phone. I thought, 'What the hell was going on?' And then one day I got a call — Pele had died. We were absolutely devastated. We couldn't believe it."

Lanier had likely known she was ill for a long time, but she delayed going to a doctor about her cancer until two weeks before the tumors claimed her. "We just figured we had to fight on, we had to push on. We knew we had to finish the album quick. It gave us a huge jolt of reality, because you just don't know what's gonna happen."

"Women get passed by so much in the music industry, but she was a strength that couldn't be passed by," Bianca says. "She was great for women in reggae."

Another who was won over by "Live & Direct" was John "Pops" Dowling, the sound engineer for English

reggae stalwarts UB40. Tony met Pops in Jamaica and slipped him a copy of the demo. Dowling, who by coincidence had grown up on the same street in Birmingham as Tony, delivered it to Sly & Robbie, who called Dowling around midnight the same day.

"They told him not to let the girls record with anybody else and to get them down here as quick as we could," remembers Tony. Sly & Robbie and Ernie Ranglin agreed to drastically reduce their fees for the project. After three weeks of recording in Kingston and Ocho Rios, Jamaica, the album was done. When it is released, it will be dedicated to the memory of Pele Lanier.

"In the music business there are so many different aspects of chauvinism," says Kyra. "You have to have a man representing you, unless that woman is Pele. From my own experiences, you can talk to men and they will look right through you. It does not matter if what you are saying makes sense. If there is a man sitting beside you saying the exact same thing, they will look at that. That's why we have been blessed to have our father representing us."

Despite the divorce, Tony and Valerie remain on good terms. Valerie, a massage therapist, helps Kyra look after Sadé and Jade. Luke Noons, Kyra and Bianca's brother, attends Houston Community College and helps Tony with management. (Brother Daniel is with the air force in Saudi Arabia.) Both Tony and his future son-in-law Orville have decades of experience in the music business for Kyra and Bianca to draw upon.

When planning their career, Bianca and Kyra first consult each other. Then they talk the plans over with their father. "If he doesn't agree with what we have to say, we'll debate it until we come to an agreement," says Kyra. "Ultimately Bianca and I have good heads on our shoulders."

"It's wonderful having this as a family affair," adds Bianca. "Arguments come and go, but we can always say 'We love you' at the end of the day."

And Tony's pride in his daughters knows no bounds. "When I was in *Hair*, I was the toast of the town," he remembers. "But that wasn't about me, it was about the show. They've taken what I've done so much further. They write their own stuff, sing their own stuff. It's a family affair, but they're the stars."

Whether they will be stars in places other than his eyes, of course, remains to be seen.

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**MoShows.com**

713-521-0900 • 800-546-0540  
neutralsisters@moshows.com