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**Alleged gay man chopped to death in MoBay**  
For many Americans, Jamaica is a tourist haven, but with numerous homophobic attacks, the island's gays and lesbians say they fear for their lives.  
ESSENCE Senior Writer **JEANNINE AMBER** investigates

# trouble in paradise

**G**ARETH HENRY IS HAUNTED BY A MEMORY. When he tells the story, his voice starts to crack. It was a sunny day, June 18, 2004, and Henry, a slightly built man with a round, boyish face and quick smile, was relaxing on the beach in Montego Bay, Jamaica, with a few friends. From where he sat, he could see three police officers approach another friend, Victor Jarrett, who was farther down the beach. Henry vividly remembers one of the officers pushing Jarrett, 24, while another yelled at him that no battymen (local patois for *faggot*) belonged on the beach. Henry winced as the officers began to beat Jarrett with their batons and fists. A crowd quickly formed around the spectacle.

"I will never forget it," Henry, 31, says, speaking in the vaguely British lilt of a well-educated Jamaican. "There were about 100 people and they were saying to the officers, 'Hand him over; let us finish him.'" According to Henry and several eyewitnesses who would later report the incident to the international rights organization Human Rights Watch, the police walked away from Jarrett, leaving him to the angry mob. "Beat him because him a battyman!" said one of the officers. Men picked up sticks and stones and started pummeling Jarrett. Others kicked and punched him. Henry stood by, horrified. He wanted nothing

more than to help his friend, but he knew that if he intervened he would become the mob's next target. "Victor saw us on the beach, but he didn't call to us," says Henry, his voice unsteady. "He'd rather suffer the hurt and humiliation alone than have all of us be victims."

Suddenly Jarrett broke free of the crowd and started to run, the mob fast on his heels. Henry prayed that Jarrett would somehow make it to safety. But the next day the newspaper reported: "Alleged gay man chopped, stabbed and stoned to death." The article (shown on opposite page) went on to claim that Jarrett had "molested" a young man. Henry, who is also gay, cried when he read the news. "Victor wasn't doing anything but walking on the beach," he says. "People make up stories to justify their attacks." Henry mourned the death of his friend and cursed the hatred that had killed him. What he didn't know was that he himself would soon be the target of another vicious mob.

### Chased, Beaten, Shot, Killed

To many Americans, the island of Jamaica, with its miles of white-sand beaches and famously laid-back attitude, is a vacationer's paradise. But for those who live here, it is a much different place, plagued by eco-



Staceyann Chin was assaulted in a public bathroom in Jamaica.

MEN HOLDING HANDS, GEN NISHINO/GETTY IMAGES; CHIN, COURTESY OF SUBJECT.

there have been reports of horrific acts targeted specifically at the country's gay and lesbian population. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have published detailed accounts of machete-wielding mobs that have broken into private residences attacking men believed to be gay, and lesbians who have been raped by neighbors determined to "cure" them.

Both organizations note that in many instances the police have either failed to respond to calls for help by gay men or have participated in the attacks they were summoned to break up. Rebecca Schleifer, author of Human Rights Watch's 2004 report, *Hated to Death: Homophobia, Violence and Jamaica's HIV/AIDS Epidemic*, observes that "perpetrators of violence against gay men and lesbians are rarely arrested and prosecuted, making it even less likely that people will report the attacks." Even children are not spared the abuse: In one of the more shocking

examples cited by Amnesty International, in February 2004, an eleventh-grader at a Kingston high school was assaulted when his father, suspecting his child was gay after finding a picture of a nude man in the boy's backpack, summoned other students to beat him.

The island's gay rights organization, Jamaica's Forum for Lesbians All-sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG), notes that between 2006 and 2008 more than 150 homophobic assaults and murders were reported to the agency. Gay men and lesbians have been chased, chopped, beaten, raped and shot. But despite the gruesome nature of the attacks, many Jamaicans, including those in politics and law enforcement, insist that the situation is simply not as bad as the activists and foreign media make out.

Bishop Herro Blair, one of Jamaica's most respected pastors, who presides over 22 churches on the island, dismisses the notion that men are being beaten for being gay. He offers his own theory for the violent killings that have been reported in Jamaican newspapers—that they are lovers' quarrels. "I can safely say, nine times out of ten, that when a homosexual is killed, it's by another homosexual," he declares, leaning forward over the desk in his stately office in the capital city of Kingston. "Homosexuals are the most jealous community you'll find anywhere in the world," he adds.

Minister of Justice Dorothy Lightbourne also isn't convinced gay men are being targeted. "There have been reports in the paper of incidences," allows Lightbourne. "But I wouldn't say

“Jamaicans feel that it's immoral to be gay.”

conomic hardships and one of the highest homicide rates in the Northern Hemisphere. While much of the violence is gang-related,

it's so widespread. I don't know, sometimes it could be youngsters too—young boys—who carry on these acts. I'm just making a suggestion."

But as activists and local officials square off about the severity of homophobia in Jamaica, gay men and lesbians say they are struggling just to stay alive.

### The Women Get Raped

Karlene, who will only give her first name for fear that someone will identify her, is a soft-spoken woman in her thirties who works for a financial company in Kingston. She has a bright, cheerful face, wears a crisp white blouse under her blue suit, and keeps her carefully styled braids in a high bun. "I don't understand how people can say this is not happening," she says, in response to the claims of local officials that J-FLAG is blowing things out of proportion. "Our help line is called every day by someone at risk. These are *not* lovers' quarrels."

J-FLAG, which is funded by anonymous donors and international human rights agencies, provides assistance to gays and lesbians who have been harassed or attacked, helping them find safe housing and making sure they get medical attention. According to the organization, gay men suffer the most abuse, but lesbians are not immune. In August, for example, Karlene was called to help Stephan, a young lesbian, and her brother, Karl, relocate >



## trouble in paradise

after they were shot at by neighbors. (Both Stephan and Karl declined to use their full names.) The two were outside their home one night, looking for a set of car keys that had fallen in the dirt. Suddenly two men who were sitting on a nearby veranda opened fire. Stephan was shot through the abdomen, the bullet piercing her kidney and liver. Bleeding profusely, she fell to the ground and pretended to be dead. As she lay there, one of the gunmen shot her between her legs. “He was aiming for my vagina,” she says, “but the bullet only grazed my buttock.”

“The lesbian fi dead,” the gunmen shouted triumphantly, and ran off in pursuit of her brother, who is also gay. Karl, shot once in the arm and twice in the side, fell by the road. With her assailants out of sight, Stephan called the police from her cell phone, then stumbled back to her house, where her 6-year-old daughter and 10-year-old niece were asleep. Stephan hid the frightened girls under the bed. Then, terrified the gunmen would come looking for her and find the children, Stephan hobbled back to the road, lay down, and waited for help to arrive.

Both siblings survived, but Stephan lost a kidney and now lives with chronic pain. Worse, she says, is the fear. While one of the shooters is in custody awaiting trial, the other was never apprehended. Fearing retaliation from the gunman still on the loose, Stephan and her brother have relocated to another part of the island, and live under the constant threat of being recognized by someone from their old neighborhood. “They shot my sister because she’s a lesbian and wears baggy clothes and

resident, says she endured online and in-person harassment following a 2007 appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in which Chin recounted being attacked by a group of men in a bathroom after coming out as lesbian on her college campus in Jamaica. Chin says after the show aired producers contacted her to make sure she—and her relatives who still live on the island—were okay. “They didn’t give me specifics,” she recalls. “They only said there had been some very disturbing phone calls.” Months later Chin, whose memoir *The Other Side of Paradise* (Scribner) will be published next month, was recognized on the street by a man who had seen her on the show. “He said I should be ashamed of myself, and if we were still in Jamaica he could kill me and nobody would care,” she says.

But why such an extreme response? Karlene shrugs. “Jamaicans feel that to be gay is immoral,” she says simply. “They think it’s foreigners who bring in this behavior and it’s nasty and not part of our culture. The feeling is, if Jamaicans perceive it to be wrong, then they have the right to eliminate it. That’s how they look at it.”

Bishop Blair asserts that what sets many people off are overt signs of homosexuality or, as he puts it, gay men “practicing their wares.” He explains that some locals feel that “if you flaunt yourself, then it affects me, it affects my children, and therefore I am sending a message that you ought to be more disciplined.”

Blair is not alone in his view that gay men are somehow courting the violence directed their way. In April 2007 an an-

gry crowd threw bottles and rocks at the True Vine Holiness church in the town of Mandeville, protesting the effeminate dress of mourners at a funeral. The police came, and according to reports, joined in the melee, laughing with the protestors. A few days later Earl Witter, Jamaica’s public defender, whose job it is to investigate complaints against governmental agencies, condemned the violence, but with a sharp warning to gay men not to flaunt their sexual orientation. According to the *Jamaica Gleaner*, the country’s major daily newspaper, Witter reportedly told a meeting of the Rotary Club that “tolerance has its limits,” and gays and lesbians should be sensitive to the “repulsion that others feel.”

Still Blair adds, he does not condone the violence against homosexuals. “Jamaica is a Christian nation,” he says, “and Christianity teaches us we have to love our neighbors as ourselves.”

### Desperate to Change

Gareth Henry was raised by his mother, grandmother and stepfather in a conservative Christian household in St. Mary, a quiet country parish about a two-hour drive from the capital city of Kingston. Even as a child, Henry knew he was different: He didn’t like to roughhouse with the other boys, prefer-

ring instead to play with his sister. The children in the neighborhood teased him mercilessly, calling him Sissy and Boy George. By adolescence, they were taunting him for his lack of interest in “sex-ing” the local girls. His family, who tried to shield him from bullying children, never openly discussed his sexuality. But they had their suspicions, says Henry. “There was a gay man in the community who was stoned and beaten,” he recalls. “One day my mother told me I needed to be careful that I didn’t turn out like him.”

After he graduated from high school, Henry asked his aunt if he could live with her in Kingston. He desperately wanted to stop thinking about boys and thought this was his opportunity to make a change. His plan was to immerse himself in the church. In Kingston he attended services seven days a week, sometimes several times a day. But the feelings persisted. Then one day Henry was at church listening to a pastor speaking with great conviction about Jamaica’s demonic gays and lesbians. They needed to repent for their sins, he thundered. The congregation was ecstatic, clapping and shouting in agreement. Sitting in their midst, Henry suddenly realized that he had come



Gareth Henry follows stories of homophobia in Jamaica’s papers (right).



to the church looking for support and guidance, “yet nowhere was this minister speaking about love,” he says.

In that moment Henry had the thought that would change his life forever: *I was made in God’s image and in His likeness, and I need to love myself as I am.* He stopped attending services and became more involved volunteering with a group that helped HIV-positive Jamaicans. Through his volunteer work, he met members of J-FLAG and slowly gained a sense of belonging. But with that came the harsh reality: To be gay in Jamaica is to live with a bull’s-eye on your back. Henry was now one of the hated.

Henry says he personally knew at least 13 people who were murdered because they were gay. There was his former roommate and coworker, Steve Harvey, abducted on his way home, shot in the head, and left on a hillside. There was Nokia Cowan, who drowned after jumping into the waters of Kingston harbor trying to escape an angry mob. There was Brian Williamson, founding member of

J-FLAG, who was brutally attacked in his home and stabbed 77 times. When Henry and other distraught friends heard the news, they went to Williamson’s home. They were met by a crowd dancing in the streets and singing lyrics from “Boom Bye Bye,” a popular dancehall song by local artist Buju Banton. “Boom bye bye inna batty bwoy head/ Rude bwoy no promote no nasty man/ Dem haffi dead,” the crowd sang. Translation: Shoot gay men in the head/ Real men don’t like their nastiness/ They should be dead.

### Murder Music

There is a common saying about Jamaica, that there are more churches per capita here than anywhere else in the world. And it may be true. In the small town where Henry grew up, he remembers 13 churches along a two-mile stretch of road that ran through his community: Methodist, Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventist, Baptist, Jehovah’s Witness, New Testament, Revival—everyone was represented. From the reserved Anglican houses with their dark wooden pews to the Pentecostal “clap hand” halls with their raucous sermons, the popular explanation for the island’s intense homophobia often rests here—*with the church.* The

thinking goes that Jamaicans have taken their pastors’ admonishment of homosexuality to violent extremes. But some experts say the truth is far more complicated.

Orville Taylor, Ph.D., a popular radio host, news-

paper columnist and senior lecturer in sociology, psychology and social work at the University of the West Indies at Mona, in Jamaica, suggests that to fully understand the roots of the country’s intolerance of homosexuality, one must look back generations to the island’s tumultuous history. “Jamaica had more slave uprisings than any other Caribbean territory,” explains Taylor. “And historical records indicate that one of the ways of controlling recalcitrant slaves was to ‘bull’ them into submission. If you were a male slave, you owned nothing—you didn’t own property, you didn’t have ownership over your children, you didn’t have sexually exclusive rights to your woman. All you had was this very fragile thing called your manhood. And so the easiest way to break you, if you were a threat to Massa, was to give you to one of the overseers who might be homosexual so that you would be bullied [raped] into submission.” Taylor says that this history of rape has produced a fear of emasculation that lingers today.

Barry Chevannes, a professor of social anthropology at the University of the West Indies at Mona, points out [CONTINUED ON PAGE 155]

“To be gay on the island is to live with a bull’s-eye on your back. You are one of the hated.”

she’s not really into the womanly thing,” says Karl. “And now we have to live in hiding.”

Karlene says that while Stephan and other lesbians have been shot or beaten, many of the women are raped. “The men tell the woman she needs some good ‘cocky’ to get her straight,” says Karlene. “They call her a sodomite and say she deserves it. Sometimes women are too ashamed or afraid to come to us for help; it’s their friends who tell us about what happened.” And frequently women are assaulted by multiple men. Karlene recalls the harrowing story of a 19-year-old “butch” lesbian the agency is trying to assist after learning the girl was gang-raped by 15 men. “We haven’t been able to reach her,” says Karlene. “So far, she hasn’t wanted to speak.”

Women have also been killed. In June 2006 a local tabloid, *The Star*, ran a story under the headline “They Were Lesbians,” detailing the murder of two women who were stabbed to death, their bodies dumped in a septic pit behind their home. A burned mattress lay beside them. Karlene says that the following January another lesbian was “beaten beyond a pulp” by her neighbors after repeated warnings that she and her partner should leave the community.

The threats have followed some Jamaican lesbians all the way to America. Staceyann Chin, author and now Brooklyn



that antigay sentiment is now deeply entrenched in the culture and promoted by many dancehall artists. In January 2004, an estimated 30,000 people attended the Rebel Salute concert in the normally quiet parish of St. Elizabeth. According to Amnesty International, performers such as Capleton and Sizzla sang “almost exclusively about gay men,” urging the audience to kill them and at one point asking the crowd, “Who wants to see [gay men] dead put up your hand.” Buju Banton’s “Boom Bye Bye” has become a theme song for mob attacks, while Elephant Man’s “A Nu Fi Wi Fault” (It’s not our fault) claims that if a lesbian gets raped, it’s nobody’s fault; sodomites should be dead. From shooting to beating to burning to raping, all manner of aggression toward gays and lesbians has been celebrated in song. So violent are these lyrics that in countries such as Canada and Britain this strain of dancehall has been dubbed “Murder Music.”

“This music creates the perception that if you are homosexual, you will be attacked,” says Chevannes. “It makes young boys afraid of even touching. Two years ago I was at a peace day celebration, and one of the organizers asked the children to turn around and give a hug to the person next to them. Pande-monium broke out. Every one of the boys scoffed at the idea of

Even today, there are those who argue that many homosexuals in Jamaica are leading perfectly safe lives, never encountering the kind of harassment that J-FLAG describes. Robert Carr, Ph.D., who serves on the board of Jamaica AIDS Support for Life, points out that social standing and economic resources have a lot to do with how homophobia is experienced here. “Middle-class professionals who can drive their own cars and afford to live in a house are protected from the worst of it,” he says. “Where you are at your most vulnerable is walking the streets, taking public transportation, living in the tight quarters of poorer communities. The less resources you have to put a wall between you and the outside environment, the more vulnerable you are.”

Carr adds that the pressure on gay men to hide their orientation has a consequence that many are only just beginning to grapple with—the spread of HIV. According to the United States Agency for International Development, in 2008 Jamaica’s HIV infection rate was 1.5 percent. However, up to 30 percent of the island’s men who have sex with men are estimated to be carrying the virus. Human Rights Watch notes that many of these men shun the safe-sex resources and information available to them for fear that health-care providers will out them as being gay.

“Social standing has a lot to do with how homophobia is experienced in Jamaica.”

hugging another boy. This is how far it has permeated.”

Taylor cites another factor that has contributed to the homophobia plaguing the island: the agitation from international groups. Recently both Canadian and British activists have successfully lobbied to stop artists from performing scheduled concerts and had their music pulled from store shelves. Then in May 2008, a Toronto-based coalition of gay rights groups decided to take their efforts a step further, calling for a tourism boycott to protest homophobic dancehall lyrics and abusive treatment of gays and lesbians.

“These types of campaigns are often seen not just as an attack on the music,” says Taylor. “People take it to mean that the entire culture is under siege. Those who would otherwise not give a hoot as to whether or not someone was homosexual start feeling as if there is a need to defend turf. And people on the margins become recruited into the antigay lobby.” As if to prove his point, three weeks after the tourism boycott was announced, and amid reports of increased violence against gays on the island, the Toronto coalition canceled its plans.

### Forced Into Hiding

While homosexuality has never been condoned in Jamaica, in the past, gay men did not inspire such aggression, reflects sociologist Taylor. Remembering the effeminate male dressmaker who lived in the village where he was raised, Taylor says, “Everybody knew he was gay and just found it kind of amusing.”

The agency has also received reports of health-care workers refusing to treat men perceived to be gay and in some instances uttering homophobic slurs to those seeking medical attention. “All this drives people in need of help further underground and away from HIV prevention services,” says Human Rights Watch’s Schleifer. Some of the men, to protect themselves from harassment, even get married and have babies, potentially passing on their risk of HIV to the women in their lives.

### The Rule of Fear

Unlike some Jamaican parents who turn their backs on their gay and lesbian children, Henry’s mother loves her son unconditionally. Every time she hears of an attack on a gay man she calls his cell phone to make sure her son is okay. On February 14, 2007, Henry’s thoughts turned to his mother as he found himself the target of a screaming mob.

Henry had stopped at a pharmacy in a strip mall in central Kingston to buy a Valentine’s Day card when he heard a commotion. Three young men he recognized from J-FLAG had burst into the store followed by a woman yelling at them that they were battymen, dressed like women. The men were wearing tight trousers. The shopkeeper ordered a security guard to remove the woman from the store. Outside, the woman, now furious, continued to yell at the men. “Yu nasty!” she shrieked, as a crowd began to form. Soon there were more than 200 people, including women with small children, outside the shop, [CONTINUED ON PAGE 156]

banging on the glass, demanding the men come out to face them. “Boom bye bye!” they chanted. “Battyman fi dead.” Henry says that when the police arrived, they, too, jeered at the men, admonishing them for inciting the riot. “One officer said the people outside had a right to want to beat us,” Henry recounts. “He said we were coming out in daylight provoking people with our nastiness and we should know better. He also said he had more important things to do than save battymen.”

According to a complaint filed with the Professional Standards Branch of the police department (now the Anti-Corruption Branch of the Jamaican Constabulary Force) and obtained by ESSENCE, one police officer then grabbed Henry, another struck him in the face and another gave him a blow to the head. The officers ordered the men to leave the store and get into a waiting patrol car. But Henry refused. With images of Victor Jarrett blazing through his mind, he clung desperately to a counter, insisting the officers not push him into the crowd. The complaint describes how four policemen tried to pry him loose, one striking him in the abdomen with his rifle. *This is it*, Henry thought as he fell to the floor. *I’m going to get killed*. As Henry fought back tears, the police suddenly changed course. Holding their guns high, several entered the crowd and, spraying teargas, dispersed the mob. Only when everyone was gone did Henry finally leave the store. To the best of his knowledge, his complaint has never been investigated.

### A Dangerous Message

When asked to respond to the allegation that officers have failed to protect citizens from, and even participated in, vio-

colleagues hurled insults at the victims. “Still,” says Karlene, “there are those who treat the men like dogs.”

Henry is convinced the homophobia in the police department will not change until those at the highest levels of public office set an example of acceptance. There is little evidence to suggest this might happen anytime soon. During the country’s 2002 election campaign, the Jamaica Labour Party reportedly used at its rallies the popular dancehall tune “Chi Chi Man” (a derogatory term for gay men). Some locals said the song, by the group T.O.K., was intended to mock the opposition. And last year the current prime minister, Bruce Golding, expressed his position on homosexuality when he declared in a May 2008 interview with BBC television that homosexuals would not be welcome in his Cabinet, adding defiantly that Jamaica is “not going to allow values to be imposed on it from the outside.”

“What message does that send?” asks Henry rhetorically. “If our leaders truly embrace human rights, they will take a stand and show that the rights of all Jamaican citizens are to be protected and all persons are to be treated as equal. Until they do that, the violence against gays and lesbians will continue.”

### Life in Exile

On January 26, 2008, Gareth Henry packed up his things and left the island. A few months earlier a man had approached him on his way to work and told him he was marked to be murdered. Henry, who had been acting as the spokesperson for J-FLAG, considered fleeing to the United States but decided that Canada, which has protection from discrimination in its Charter of Rights and Freedoms, would be a more hospitable

“Antigay sentiment is now deeply entrenched and promoted by many dancehall artists.”

lence against gay men, Commissioner of Police Hardley Lewin allows that his officers are products of their environment. “Jamaica, by and large, is a homophobic society; that’s a fact,” he says. “And there is no question that in our past there have been attacks on gays, and the police response might not have been what one would expect from a police service.” Still, insists Lewin, the situation is not necessarily as dire as the activists claim: “If we look at the last several months there have been excellent examples of police officers acting professionally and actually rescuing alleged homosexuals from hostile crowds. In all of those efforts, policemen have been injured and police vehicles have been damaged in their attempts to whisk away to safety alleged homosexuals. The vast majority of people—homosexual, heterosexual, no sexual, metrosexual or whatever—have overwhelmingly good things to say about the police and police activity.”

J-FLAG’s cochair Karlene acknowledges that not all police officers are abusive. She recalls one female officer who helped two men after they’d been attacked, even as the officer’s

place. “I didn’t want to move somewhere and have to deal with the same kind of humiliation as I did at home,” he explains. Four months after his arrival in Toronto, Henry was granted refugee status on the grounds that his life would be in danger if he returned to Jamaica.

He now lives in a sparsely furnished apartment in a modest high-rise in downtown Toronto, enduring the sometimes frigid temperatures, far from his family and the country he still loves. “I’m safe here,” he says of his new city, where he works as a community organizer dealing with issues of inequality. “I’m not being chased through the streets.” He pauses for a moment, then sighs. “But this is not home,” he says finally. Henry misses the sunny warmth of Jamaica. He misses his family, the laughter of his friends, the waves rolling up on the white-sand beaches. As much as his country turned on him, beat him, showered him with hatred, he longs to go back there. “I’m Jamaican,” he says simply. “I’d like to go home. But if I did, I know they’d kill me.” □  
**Jeannine Amber’s last article for ESSENCE was the November 2008 cover story on Beyoncé.**