



# GETTING STRONG NOW

ETANA LIVES UP TO HER NAME  
BY JESSE SERWER

**F**emale reggae artists almost always find themselves boxed into one of two categories. There are your sexy dancehall divas in the vein of Lady Saw or D'Angel on one side, and conscious, Earth mother types like Marcia Griffiths and Queen Ifrica on the other.

But reggae's newest female sensation, Etana, isn't so easy to pin down. Feisty and provocative yet consummately warm and grounded, the 24-year-old singer/songwriter from August Town, Kingston has blazed a unique trail since emerging in 2006 with "Wrong Address," a heartfelt account of job discrimination against residents of poor communities. Though she has taken the reggae scene by storm, her richly textured voice and acoustic guitar-driven songs evoke folk singer Tracy Chapman more than say, Sizzla, and songs like "Roots" and "Warrior Love" abound with what A&R men might call "crossover potential."

"Wherever I go, people keep calling me 'Little Tracy Chapman,'" Etana says through a giggle. "I look at life like a garden full of different flowers, different colors...There are many sides to me so I

choose to put it all out there, naturally."

The only girl in a large family of boys, Etana's musical evolution began in Miami, where she moved with her mother at age nine. She eventually found herself pursuing mainstream stardom, leaving college to become part of a female quartet called Gift, but was soon put off by the group's suggestive lyrics and reliance on sexy clothes.

"The last video we did, we were in Victoria's Secret lingerie and stiletto heels," Etana explains. "I don't know what the cameraman was looking at, but I thought, 'I don't even know him,' and walked off the set. I decided I was going to go to Jamaica and open up an Internet café." She recalls another incident where a five-year-old girl who recognized her from Gift serenaded her with her own lyrics. "I [thought], 'Oh my god, I introduced this five-year-old girl to sex.' I was so embarrassed, I felt smaller than her."

Etana walked away from the music business, returning to Jamaica in 2004 to pursue her business idea. It was there that she embraced Rastafarianism and decided to shed her Christian name, Shauna McKenzie, in favor of an African name that would

be more reflective of her personality. She selected Etana, after learning that it meant "The Strong One," which would ultimately become the title of her newly released debut album. By 2005, she put her Internet café plans on hold after she was asked to join Richie Spice's band as a backup singer.

"I was never interested in being a solo artist. I was always more interested in starting a company," she says. "But I started realizing people were appreciating me for being me—wearing my hair in an Afro, things like that. On tour, people kept asking Richie, 'Who's the girl?'"

Despite the long-running reggae tradition of releasing singles recorded on popular rhythm tracks, none of Etana's numerous hits have been recorded this way. *The Strong One* features all original music from producers like Robert Livingston, Dean Fraser and Etana herself.

"When you jump on a rhythm, if your song doesn't stand out, you get lost in the shuffle," she says. "And that's just a waste of lyrics. I just put it out there the way I see it." ■

*The Strong One* is out now on VP Records.