

WORLD

Native son.
Expatriate.
Activist.
Musician.
Ambassador.
President?

Wyclef Jean Enters the Race To Rescue a Battered Haiti

BY TIM PADGETT/PORT-AU-PRINCE

HIP-HOP MUSIC, MORE THAN most pop genres, is something of a pulpit, urban fire and brimstone garbed in baggy pants and backward caps. So it's little wonder that one of the form's icons, Haitian-American superstar Wyclef Jean, is the son of a Nazarene preacher—or that he likens himself, as a child of the Haitian diaspora, to a modern-day Moses, destined to return and lead his people out of bondage. Haiti's Jan. 12 earthquake, which killed more than 200,000 people, was the biblical event that sealed his calling. After days of helping ferry mangled Haitian corpses to morgues, Jean felt as if he'd "finished the journey from my basket in the bulrushes to standing in front of the burning bush," he told me this week. "I knew I'd have to take the next step."

That would be running for President of Haiti. Jean told *TIME* he is going to announce his candidacy for the Nov. 28 election just days before the Aug. 7 deadline. One plan, loaded with as much Mosaic symbolism as a news cycle can hold, called for him to declare his presidential bid on Aug. 5 upon arriving in Port-au-Prince from New York, where he grew up after leaving Haiti with his family at age 9. "If not for the earthquake, I probably would have waited another 10 years before doing this," says Jean, who is only 37. "The quake drove home to me that Haiti can't wait another 10 years for us to bring it into the 21st century." Jean sees no contradiction between his life as an artist and his ambitions as a politician. "If I can't take five years out to serve my country as President," he argues, "then everything I've been singing about, like equal rights, doesn't mean anything."

It's tempting to dismiss this as flaky performance art, a publicity stunt from the same guy who just a few years ago recorded

Photograph by Peter Hapak for *TIME*



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Scale: 84.67% x 84.67%



a number called “If I Was President.” But Jean’s chances, as well as his motives, seem solid. And there are good reasons for Haitians—and the U.S.-led international donor community, which is bankrolling Haiti’s long slog to the 21st century—to take this particular hip-hop politician seriously. Pop-culture celebrity hardly disqualifies one from high office today. (The last time I looked, an action hero was still running California.) And in Haiti, where half the population of about 9 million is under age 25, it’s an asset as golden as a rapper’s chains. Amid Haiti’s gray postquake rubble, Jean is far more popular with that young cohort than Haiti’s chronically corrupt and inept mainstream politicians are, and he’ll likely galvanize youth participation in the election.

More important, Jean stands to prove that fame can do more than lift voter turnout—or raise millions of dollars for earthquake victims, as his *Yéle Haiti* (Haiti Freedom Cry) foundation has this year. His presidential run, win or lose, could build a long-awaited bridge between Haiti and its diaspora: a legion of expatriates and their progeny, successful in myriad fields, who number more than a million in the U.S. alone. International aid managers agree that Haiti can’t recover unless it taps into the education, capital, entrepreneurial drive and love for the mother country that Jean epitomizes—even if his French (one of Haiti’s official languages) is poor and his Creole (the other) is rusty. “A lot of Haitians are excited about this,” says Marvel Dandin, a popular Port-au-Prince radio broadcaster. “Given the awful situation in Haiti right now,” he says, “most people don’t care if the President speaks fluent Creole.”

Accentuating the Positive

JEAN’S CELEBRITY CANDIDACY AT LEAST promises to keep an erratic media more regularly focused on Haiti’s awful situation. International donors have pledged some \$10 billion in aid, but mountains of shattered concrete still choke Port-au-Prince’s streets, and more than a million people remain homeless, trapped in squalid tent cities as a sclerotic bureaucracy and loosely organized aid groups struggle to relocate them to decent temporary shelters. The Caribbean hurricane season, which reaches its peak in about a month, threatens to make conditions even uglier.

Jean has spent most of his life trying to show the world the positive side of star-crossed Haiti. Despite his Brooklyn and New Jersey upbringing—where he recalls weekly “beat up a Haitian” days at his schools—he proudly embraced the nation, even when, in the 1980s and ’90s, *Haiti* was

an abject byword for boat people, AIDS and dictators. “A lot of us focused on assimilation in the U.S.,” says Jean’s younger brother Sam, a New York City entertainment lawyer. “Clef was unabashedly proud to be Haitian long before it was in vogue.” So much so that Jean never took U.S. citizenship, instead carrying a Haitian passport on his international concert tours.

Jean brought Haiti and its culture into his Grammy-winning music too. As a member of the groundbreaking hip-hop group the Fugees (short for *refugees*) in the mid-’90s and then as a solo act, Jean built *kompa*, *rasin* and other Haitian rhythms into hits like “Gone Till November.” His work earned him a reputation as Haiti’s Bob Marley, helping foreigners unearth a vibrant culture so often buried under the misery. Not that he left out the misery: like Marley’s songs, Jean’s exude a raw but poetic social content. The video for his 2007 hit “Sweetest Girl (Dollar Bill),” which examines exploitation both sexual and national, is set in a camp for refugees facing deportation.

Now he wants to move beyond music. Jean has become so involved with not just the culture but the cause of Haiti that he feels it’s only logical to follow other artist-to-statesman career trajectories. (He mentions Ronald Reagan and former Czech President Vaclav Havel as examples of the type.) *Yéle Haiti* has secured scholarships and aid for thousands of destitute Haitian kids. Since the earthquake, the *Yéle Corps* has given Haitians jobs removing rubble and housing the displaced. Jean sits through the kind of development conferences in Washington and Europe that would bore most do-gooder celebs to tears. “I want to be part of a different kind of celebrity,” he says, “one that thinks not just about charity but policy.” He’s been noticed. In 2007, Haitian President René Préval appointed Jean an ambassador-at-large.

Yet serious doubts persist that Jean is ready for a role beyond that of goodwill envoy, most of them focused on his management of *Yéle Haiti*. Shortly after the quake, when Jean had been all but canonized for his Haiti work, skeptics pointed out that his foundation had been paying hundreds of thousands of dollars to production companies owned by him or his associates. In Florida, where the charity has an office, it failed to file its paperwork on time in four of the past six years, and watchdogs like Charity Navigator have questioned it for filing tax returns that were “beyond late.” Jean has acknowledged the questionable payments but blamed them on accounting errors. He insists the problems have been fixed since he hired a reputable Washington account-



ing firm to whip *Yéle Haiti*’s books into shape. “I took responsibility,” he says. “I took the bullet.”

More shots may be fired at his claim of eligibility for the presidency. A candidate is required to have resided in Haiti for five consecutive years, and Jean’s advisers insist that the nine years he lived in the country after birth satisfy that criterion. But Haiti’s political and business elites—who, after living through the populist ordeal of former Roman Catholic priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s two presidencies, aren’t exactly thrilled about a diaspora hip-hopper—are likely to grab any challenge they can throw at Jean.

That Haitian political class, it should be remembered, has its own epic shortcomings, whether measured by incompetence or venality. (No other Haitian politician has yet declared for the presidency, although Jean’s uncle Raymond Joseph, Haiti’s ambassador to the U.S., is reportedly planning to.) Haiti’s traditional elite has shown an utter failure—and a lack of will—to reform a medieval land-ownership system, something that is vital to getting the country’s crucial population-



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Scale: 78.1% x 78.1%

Jean's presidential run could build a long-awaited bridge between Haiti and its diaspora, a legion of expatriates and their progeny

relocation project going. Most Haitians consider President Préval to have been all but AWOL since the quake, and tales of bureaucratic shakedowns to get foreign-donated relief equipment and supplies out of customs are appallingly commonplace.

The Diaspora's Favorite

AGAINST THAT BACKDROP, HAITIAN VOTERS may well decide that Jean and his reformist party, Ensemble Nous Faut (We Must Do It Together), could do no worse than the old guard and could shake things up for the better. His campaign slogan, "Face à Face" (Face to Face), he says, is a signal that "the old school will have to fall in line with a new model. Haitian government will finally be conducted out in the open."

Outside Haiti, Jean has little trouble finding support. Many diaspora leaders are rooting for him. (He's married to a Haitian American, New York fashion designer Marie Claudinette.) But given the elite's long-held disdain for expats, the diaspora's hope is tempered. "I think Wyclef's candidacy is going to surprise a lot of people," says former Florida state representative Phillip Brutus, a Haitian

Port-au-Prince Seven months after the earthquake, its mountains of rubble are a constant reminder of Haiti's political paralysis. American from Miami and a candidate for the U.S. Congress. "But I fear that if you parachute him into the Haitian presidency, the culture of corruption and cronyism there may well eat him alive."

Jean insists he's not playing "the naive idealist." He gets much of his platform, he says, "right out of the playbook" of former U.S. President Bill Clinton, the U.N.'s special envoy to Haiti, whose pragmatic vision of bringing business, government and civil society together for development ventures was bearing fruit there before the earthquake hit. "I'm the only man who can stand in the middle and get the diaspora and Haiti's elite families to cooperate that same way," says Jean. (It's not a ridiculous claim: if Ivory Coast soccer phenom Didier Drogba could bring his country's warring factions together a few years ago, who's to say Jean can't use his renown to succeed in Haiti?) Jean's priority—one he shares with Haiti's Prime Minister, Jean-Max Bellerive, who is widely respected but so deeply involved in the reconstruction effort that he is unlikely to run for President—is to disperse both power and population from overcrowded Port-au-Prince. Jean wants to revive Haiti's fallow agriculture with new rural communities tied to schools, clinics and businesses.

His secret weapon, Jean says, is that Haiti's "enormous youth population doesn't believe in [its] politicians anymore." On one Port-au-Prince street corner, Sydney Meristal, who is 23 and unemployed, says he will vote for the first time in November because of Jean. "Wyclef loves Haiti. He has ideas for Haiti," says Meristal, idling away the time on his motorcycle. "He'll win." But Steve Burr-Renauld, 23, who hails from an affluent family in the capital, doesn't think a hip-hop star has the credentials to run. "What if Jay-Z became President of the U.S.?" he asks. "That would never happen." If Jean were elected President of Haiti, Burr-Renauld warns, it would be like another earthquake aftershock.

Jean admits that "it's a hard thing for people to take artists seriously" in the political arena. In the chorus of "If I Was President"—"I'd get elected on Friday, assassinated on Saturday, buried on Sunday, then go back to work on Monday"—Jean makes you wonder if he takes politics all that seriously himself. But the verses remind you that he's in Old Testament earnest about it: "The radio won't play this/ They call it rebel music/ But how can you refuse it, children of Moses?" —WITH REPORTING BY JESSICA DESVARIEUX/PORT-AU-PRINCE ■