

Joan ‘Nanook’ Webley

ACTIVIST / LAWYER / ARTIST

Jamaican powerhouse Joan ‘Nanook’ Webley wears so many different career hats – intellectual property lawyer, president of a medical ganja company and singer, to name a few – that she could open a milliner’s. But there’s a common thread running through the various ventures of this self-proclaimed “creative cultural connector” – Joan’s constant search for ways to protect and promote her beloved home nation.

Famed worldwide as the birthplace of reggae, jerk seasoning, Blue Mountain coffee and Red Stripe beer, it’s a mystery to Joan why Jamaica has, so far, failed to capitalise on its heritage and talent pool. “It’s this interesting society that’s so culturally dense. We’ve got all this great raw talent. Everyone acknowledges that Jamaica is the factory, but there are only limited refineries. So just like in the sugarcane days, it (the talent) is being exported or it’s just laying here,” she says. “What it needs is connections and people working together more.”

That’s where Joan comes in. The daughter of Jamaica’s youngest female MP, she put aside her passion for singing to train as an intellectual property lawyer in Australia, working across the film and music industries. Twelve years ago, she returned home “with the intention of being part of a positive shift that sees Jamaica benefit from its culture” and launched Nanook, Kingston’s first creative hub, alongside her day job as national manager of copyright. It swiftly became a Soho House-esque focal point for talent connection and development, hosting film screenings, live jams and poetry sessions.

However, by 2016, Nanook’s financial struggles forced Joan to pivot to a different industry: cannabis. “Ganja has always been [Jamaica’s] reality. People have always grown and used it for medicinal and socialising purposes, and it’s played an important part in our

creative industries,” she points out. “I wanted to ensure that when it was formalised, it wasn’t just big businesses that would benefit.”

As president of medical cannabis dispensary Itopia Life, she is now focused on shaping a ganja company that’s “true to the culture of Jamaica,” focusing on healing rather than recreational use. “Ganja isn’t like Panadol: you can’t give someone two to take and go home. It requires a deeper connection,” she explains.

Ganja isn’t the only Jamaican product to benefit from Joan’s IP and branding expertise. The famous Blue Mountain coffee has plummeted in price in recent years, resulting in many local growers blending their beans with cheaper imports, but, inspired by her coffee farming heritage, Joan is fighting back. As well as founding her own brand of 100 per cent Blue Mountain coffee, she is supporting the formation of female-led cooperatives as a board member of the Jamaican Women in Coffee organisation.

And her original ambition to sing? That’s now come full circle with the release of her first album, described as a “fusion sound – as global and eccentric as I am.” The first single, Level Up, produced by Australian label Rise Nation and recorded with Riddim Nation at Nanook, represents a real coming together of Joan’s different worlds and a fresh perspective for her as the artist, rather than behind the scenes.

Ultimately, Joan hopes to establish a framework for Jamaicans to travel the world and share their culture freely – and, in turn, for the world to better connect with the country’s three pillars: agriculture, wellness and entertainment. “We just need to get out of our own way and have a unified vision,” she concludes. “A positive story about the greatness that Jamaica is and could be.”

