

## Movie Reviews



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### Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae

By [Ken Eisner](#)

**A documentary by Stascha Bader. Rated G.**

Jamaican music is so dominated by a few outsized characters that it would take several documentaries just to flesh things out. *Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae* smartly focuses on the brief period in the late 1960s between uptempo ska, which drew heavily on American R & B, and the easygoing Rastafarian reggae groove we associate with Bob Marley and the Wailers.

Watch the trailer for *Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae*.

This well-crafted Swiss-Canadian coproduction documents a reunion of surviving pioneers of rocksteady, the slow-beat, skank-heavy sound in question. Heading from parts far and close, singers and studio cats (like drummer Sly

Dunbar and guitar wizard Ernest Ranglin) converge in Kingston, Jamaica, to talk about roots, re-record big hits, and rehearse for an outdoor concert aimed at their similarly aged fans.

With Toronto-based Stranger Cole as our gently engaging guide, highlights include Leroy Sibbles harmonizing with the Tamlins on a sunset beach, Dawn Penn in the studio with her sultry “You Don’t Love Me (No, No, No)”, and Rita Marley reminiscing in a certain “government yard in Trenchtown”. “This is where I first had sex with Bob,” she announces. Mostly, the personal stuff comes from telling details, courtesy of Zurich-based director Stascha Bader, who has a PhD in Jamaican poetry and takes the Buena Vista Social Club route of mixing music with visual context, plus great archival footage.

One memorable segment jumps from the sepia-toned club scene in the early ’60s to blind Derrick Morgan performing “Tougher Than Tough” amid ruins of the abandoned Palace Theatre. (Singer Ken Boothe, who recalls Harry Belafonte at times, explains how violent rude boys wrecked Kingston nightlife by decade’s end.) The climactic concert, briefly glimpsed, isn’t nearly as compelling, but by then *Rocksteady* has well made its case: that the riddim lives on.