

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## One last rocksteady reunion - on film

Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae is Stascha Bader's first commercially released feature

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One of the pleasures of popular music is its unpredictability: You just never know what sound or song is going to strike that magical, mystical chord with a listener and change his or her tastes, maybe even his life.

Stascha Bader is a case in point. As a teenager living in his hometown of Zurich, Switzerland, during the early 1970s, he developed a passion for the reggae music originating then from Jamaica - a passion he continued to entertain through his years at Zurich University, to the point of writing a PhD thesis titled *Electro-Oral Poetry in Jamaica and England*. In 1988 the thesis was adapted into a book called *Words of Fire*.

Now 53, Bader admitted the other day on the phone from Switzerland that by the mid-1990s he'd "pretty much overdosed on reggae."

A documentary filmmaker by this time, producing programs for Swiss, German and Austrian television, he'd "long since stopped listening" to those Rastaman vibrations. Then about four years ago, while flipping through his music collection, he became intrigued by some Jamaican rocksteady records bought decades earlier. "Hearing it again, I realized how unique and beautiful that sound was," he said.

Soon Bader was on the prowl for more rocksteady recordings. As he did, he began to think the idiom just might serve as the subject of a film - an inkling that became reality this year with *Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae*, Bader's first commercially released feature. (It had its North American premiere at Montreal's jazz festival earlier this month, and begins its commercial run this Friday in Vancouver and Toronto.)

A bit of context: Rocksteady is generally regarded as the bridge between ska and reggae. Ska, starting in the late 1950s, in pre-independence Jamaica, is distinguished by a speedy, off-kilter rhythm underpinning R & B-flavoured Jamaican folk tunes played on electric guitars, horns and keyboards. Rocksteady surfaced in 1965, three years after Jamaica became self-governing. It essentially "calmed down the [ska] rhythm" while heightening the lilt of the melody. Rocksteady's mass appeal, however, lasted no more than three years before being superseded by the now-familiar sounds and cadence of reggae and with it the rise of Bob Marley, the first Third World music superstar.

### **Realizing the concept**

Bader had the concept for what would become *Rocksteady* pretty much sorted out in his head by early 2006. He would gather as many "stars" of the rocksteady era as possible for "one last reunion" in

Kingston, Jamaica's capital. He'd get them to reminisce on-camera and visit their old haunts. Then, "to make it brand-new one more time," he'd crowd them into Kingston's Tuff Gong Studios to record a CD of new versions of their most famous tunes, followed by a revue-style concert before a large, live audience. In the meantime, he'd dig up as much archival footage as possible "to bring in the social, cultural and political context."

Realizing the concept, of course, proved a lot harder. Several rocksteady giants were either dead (Jackie Mittoo, Delroy Wilson) or dying (Alton Ellis, Roy Shirley). Moreover, while Jamaica's population is close to three million, at least that many Jamaicans are scattered around the globe, including many rocksteady progenitors. Fortunately, in fall 2006, Bader got a grant from the Zurich Film Foundation to travel to Toronto, New York, Los Angeles, London and Kingston to meet with musicians, co-ordinate itineraries and firm up the reunion concept. "The feedback from the rocksteady community was extremely positive. ... It made me really want to continue and finish the job."

However, all the parameters only gelled in early 2008, including the participation of producers Muse Entertainment from Montreal and Zurich's HesseGreutert Film. "It was a logistical undertaking, a financial undertaking, a psychological undertaking, a cultural undertaking," Bader says. "Very often we were at our limits."

One of *Rocksteady's* key figures is 64-year-old Wilburn Theodore Cole, better known as Stranger Cole (because, as he explains in the film, "when I was a baby, I was told I didn't resemble anyone in my family") and sometimes StrangeJah Cole.

Cole, who began writing and performing songs in Jamaica in his mid-teens, is the documentary's narrator and dominant presence - functions Bader only ascribed once filming began. "I visited Jamaica three times before I started shooting and each time Stranger Cole was there," the director explained. "He was incredibly open; he shared his time with us; he provided us with precious links and insights. Plus, he's such a charmer, so I kind of fell in love with him, his talent at speaking, his reflectiveness."

Further, with Cole, Bader was able to realize his determination "to avoid having some unknown voice, like an actor - an outsider - explaining the rocksteady world to us." For Bader, *Rocksteady* had to be as much an ethnographically correct oral history as a compelling documentary.

In 1968, Cole, with saxophonist Lester Sterling, recorded in Kingston what is now considered one of the first reggae songs, *Bangarang*. Unable to parlay this into a financially viable musical career, however, Cole joined the Jamaican diaspora, emigrating to England in 1971, then moving to Toronto two years later. "It was to get a job," he explained in a recent interview. "It wasn't so much a musical thing." Indeed, for the next 15 years Cole did factory work for Tonka Toys and Snap-On Tools, saving enough in the process to open a specialty music store in the late 1970s in Kensington Market called (what else?) Stranger Cole Records.

By 1988, however, Cole was back in Jamaica, and it's been his base ever since. "The music thing wasn't going for me in Canada, and music is always what I wanted to do so I figured I had to get back. And, y'know," he said, "it really worked." Not only has Cole's recording career flourished - he recently released two CDs, both produced by his son, Squidly - he has travelled to Germany, France, England, Italy and Japan to perform his rocksteady and reggae songs.

Cole, who now has dual Canadian-Jamaican citizenship, is a genial presence throughout *Rocksteady's* 98 minutes. But he's not around for one of the film's most affecting moments: a visit to the legendary

Trenchtown neighbourhood of West Kingston by Rita Marley, wife of the late Bob Marley and an esteemed singer in her own right.

Trenchtown, with its government housing projects, poverty, overcrowding and criminality, is sometimes called the cradle of reggae, but it was a rocksteady hotbed, too. (Rita Marley, for example, sang there with a female rocksteady trio known as the Soulettes.) Bader originally had planned to have singer-songwriter Ken Boothe tour Trenchtown for his crew. "But on that very day Ken was not available and, unfortunately, that very day was the last day of shooting. So the day before, there we were wondering, 'Who's going to take us there?' Then we remembered Rita Marley [who has lived in Ghana for many years] was on the island because of Bob Marley's mother's funeral." Luckily, they were able to locate her and, thankfully, she agreed to participate.

Right now Bader is letting two ideas for possible feature films marinate in his brain. One has to do with the music of the Balkans, the other with "where reggae has gone today. Maybe it'd be a Stranger Cole road movie, with Stranger travelling the world to non-Jamaican places. I mean, you have reggae music, reggae culture in Hawaii, Eastern Europe, Japan, even in Arab countries. I was in Bali and reggae is strong there. The seed has been taken wherever the wind blows."

*Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae opens in Vancouver and Toronto on Friday, and other Canadian cities later this summer. The Rocksteady soundtrack was released June 30 in Canada on the Moll-Selekta label.*

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