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Stranger Cole, who opened Toronto's first Jamaican record store in Kensington market, is featured in the documentary *Rocksteady*.

It sounds like an odd fit: A Swiss filmmaker making a movie about the evolution of Caribbean rhythms.

But Stascha Bader, whose documentary *Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae* paints a vivid portrait of Jamaica's music scene in the mid-1960s, has an affinity for the music that transcends geography.

As a student in the 1970s, Bader was so taken by the "rocksteady" genre — a slower, more laid back version of ska featuring heavily politicized lyrics — that he made it the subject of his doctoral thesis at the University of Zurich.

"Everybody looks at rocksteady as reggae," explains Bader via email from Switzerland. "But rocksteady has a special and unique sound. It is influenced by soul and jazz, whereas reggae is heavily influenced by rock."

"The amps became much bigger, the bass and the drum started to dominate, and the studio producers began experimenting with a whole new range of electronic equipment. And yes, the hair grew longer, too."

Bader would seem to have an encyclopedic knowledge of the genre, but he defers the narration of his film to the musicians themselves. As *Rocksteady* opens, a number of seminal rocksteady performers have gathered in Kingston for a reunion concert, and the film is structured as a series of rehearsals and reminiscences.

The film would not have been possible without the participation of musical legends like Judy Mowatt and Hopeton Lewis and Stranger Cole, all of whom supplement their interviews with performances.

The 63-year old Cole actually has roots in Toronto, opening the city's first Jamaican record store in Kensington market; his rendition of the rocksteady staple *Morning Train* is one of the film's undeniable highlights.

"To be frank," says Bader, "Stranger Cole is not a great singer in a classical sense. He doesn't have the same gun of a voice as Ken Boothe or Hopeton Lewis, or even Judy Mowatt. And he is sometimes off key. But he is incredibly charming, and his voice is absolutely unique."

"All of this, together, with his stage presence, is hard to beat. I don't think that age has changed any of that. It maybe has added more charm to his personality."

• **Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae opens in Toronto next week.**