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MOVIE REVIEWS (Week Beginning July 24)

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ROCKSTEADY: THE ROOTS OF REGGAE

Directed by Stascha Bader

Rounding up all the key figures from rocksteady's heyday, Stascha Bader's charming documentary finally gives the under-appreciated music genre its due.

Vocalist Judy Mowatt suggests that rocksteady was born of a particular "romantic period." In 1962, Jamaica had just won its independence from England, and citizens were flocking to the capital of Kingston in droves. During this era of profound change, traditional ska music was evolving into reggae, with the slow and soulful rocksteady providing the key bridge in between. There was an overt hopefulness to the music, perhaps best exemplified by "The Tide is High" (later famously covered by Blondie).

In league with cinematographer Piotr Jaxa, Bader offers a visually vibrant portrait of the colourful Caribbean island that's spawned a wealth of seminal music and often appears to be a world unto its own. Incorporating select archival footage, the filmmaker lends some insight into the religious, political, social and economic influences on Jamaica's artists. However, his primary concern remains letting the musicians and their songs speak for themselves.

After a separation lasting decades, stalwarts of the genre like Stranger Cole (who supplies much of the film's narration), the aforementioned Mowatt, Hopeton Lewis, Marcia Griffiths, Ernest Ranglin, and Derrick Morgan reconvene at Kingston's Tuff Gong studio to record a greatest-hits album and rehearse for a reunion show. The mutual admiration the players share quickly becomes contagious for the viewer. While the veterans' voices

and playing chops may occasionally fail them, their spirits and personalities still burn bright. The sight (and sound) of the weathered Morgan performing “Tougher than Tough” in the ruins of an old theatre provides a truly striking cinematic moment.

Early on, it’s stated that the impetus for making this film was ensuring that rocksteady wouldn’t be forgotten. Rest assured, the end product is very memorable indeed. HHHHH
—C.W.