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Rocksteady: The Roots Of Reggae

BY JASON ANDERSON July 22, 2009 21:07

This amiable history lesson about the birth of reggae takes a rather literal approach to its subject when Rita Marley, while giving a tour of the original Trenchtown stomping grounds for so many legends of Jamaican music, shows off the room where she and Bob had their first carnal encounters. Other matters in this Swiss-Canadian documentary are not quite so salacious but *Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae* is still an engaging celebration of the smooth, lovers-friendly musical style that ruled the island in the years between ska and reggae.

Political turmoil, economic woes and the rise of Rastas and rudeboys all provide a lively backdrop for rocksteady's too-brief heyday in the mid-'60s. Performers such as Ken Boothe, Marcia Griffiths and Derrick Morgan share their recollections and perform their classics, thereby reminding viewers that "The Tide Is High" had a rich history before Blondie (ditto for "Rivers of Babylon" and Boney M).

Though appropriately appreciative of his charismatic subjects as they visit Kingston hotspots of a bygone era, director Stascha Bader shortchanges them by truncating many of the musical sequences — to include only a few minutes of the climactic reunion concert seems particularly cruel. It's also a shame that more isn't made of the Canadian connection that brought rocksteady heroes such as Jackie Mittoo and Leroy Sibbles to Toronto. Fellow émigré Stranger Cole, who also serves as *Rocksteady's* narrator, talks of opening a store in Kensington Market and working as a machine operator for Tonka Toys. I can't confirm whether Bob Marley ever had sex at Honest Ed's, but it's worth finding out.