



Volume 14 No. 38
August 27, 2009
FILM REVIEWS

Babylon social club

Rocksteady toasts Jamaica's musical past

Published August 28, 2009 *by* [Jesse Locke](#) in [Film Reviews](#)



ROCKSTEADY: THE ROOTS OF REGGAE

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The best kinds of music documentaries do more than just educate and entertain; they send newfound fans into frenzies, delving into the discographies of the artists profiled. With its in-depth exploration of the Jamaican genre of rocksteady, following many of the movement's most celebrated stars in preparation for a recent reunion, *Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae* succeeds on all fronts.

From 1966 to 1968, rocksteady provided a laid-back link between the previously pervasive jumped-up rhythms of ska and the fiery political consciousness of reggae. Played at a pace that fans of any age could enjoy, the genre also summarized the feelings of the country's population: Optimism for the economic upturn, subtle subversion and a call for all to slow down and enjoy their independence from Britain.

Rocksteady's cast of characters is a larger-than-life bunch, some more likable than others, yet each uniquely eccentric and unarguably charismatic. With a mix of archival footage, stylish album covers from their era and brand new interviews, Swiss director Stascha Bader brings the aging musicians back to significant settings from their musical past. From the wide-smiling narrator Stranger Cole to the diva-like Judy Mowatt, all seem genuinely excited to rejoin their peers onstage.

For anyone unfamiliar with the genre, the documentary also provides plenty of entry points doubling as evidence of rocksteady's widespread influence. Blondie's hit "Tide is High," for example, was originally written and recorded by Jamaican singer John Holt, while "Rivers of Babylon," another rocksteady original, is likely best remembered for its disco cover from Germany's Boney M. Dawn Penn's powerful 1967 single "You Don't Love Me Anymore (No No No)," which might be the most enduring of all, as it has since been sampled or covered by everyone from Ghostface Killah to Lily Allen, Eve, Murs and Rihanna.

However, it's not all filmed through rose-coloured lenses and sequences such as Rita Marley's stories of living in the poverty-stricken Trenchtown and the effects of blind ska star Derek Morgan's infidelity on his marriage — revealed on his wife's face in an incredibly candid clip — are highly charged with emotion. Similar to this year's *Tyson*, *Rocksteady's* story is presented warts and all.

Listening to the tales of these musicians some 40 years after their heyday, it becomes increasingly evident how they have persevered through the good times and the bad. As such, rocksteady's mellow melancholia is tailor-made for the well-worn pipes of the elderly artists performing it here, almost as if they had written their songs with their future selves in mind.