

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## Before there was Marley ★★☆☆

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### **Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae**

- Directed by Stascha Bader
- With Stranger Cole, Judy Mowatt, Marcia Griffiths, Rita Marley, Ken Boothe, Leroy Sibbles, Hopeton Lewis and Dawn Penn
- Classification: G

What a delight it is to watch Jamaican musicians of the late sixties reunite for the film *Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae*. There's such a combination of personal warmth, talent, history and creativity that it's impossible not to get caught up in their pride and love for the music they created.

A Canadian-Swiss co-production, the film is smartly directed by Swiss filmmaker Stascha Bader, who did his doctorate on Jamaican music. He lets the musicians tell their own stories in a series of interviews, interspersed with in-studio musical performances. The whole package is held together by the gentle voice-over narration of Stranger (Wilburn) Cole, a percussionist and singer who was a central figure in the sixties' Jamaican music scene.

Like two similar documentaries, *Buena Vista Social Club*, about veteran Cuban musicians, and *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, about the Motown house band, this is a film about people who were young 40 years ago but still carry a real fire for the music they created.

The subject, at first, seems an odd one: Rocksteady was a transitional genre, a slow and soulful style that only lasted for about three or four years, between the cranked up rhythms of ska (typified by the 1964 Millie Small hit, *My Boy Lollipop*) and the more rock-influenced reggae music of Bob Marley and other bands that became Jamaica's biggest cultural export.

Many of the rocksteady tunes are straight-ahead love songs such as *The Tide Is High* (revived by Blondie in 1980). Singer Judy Mowatt refers to rocksteady as taking place just at the beginning of the "consciousness era," and the musicians collectively seem to see it as a relatively innocent time and an optimistic one in the first years following Jamaican independence (1962). Of course, it was the sixties, and some of the songs deal with social commentary about the back-to-Africa movement and the emerging "rude boy" gang violence. Sly Dunbar, drummer extraordinaire, even suggests rocksteady might have been a musically richer period than reggae, marked by a combination of heartfelt melodies and jazzy instrumental intricacy.

Poverty, oppression and exile are all themes here. Marley's widow, Rita, takes us on a tour of the impoverished community of Trenchtown and talks about how you can hear the yearning for a better

life in the music, which eventually merged into the more militant themes of reggae.

Marley, who now lives in Ghana (she was in Jamaica during filming to attend the funeral of her deceased husband's mother), points out the kitchen in which she first made love to Bob Marley. Raggedly dressed kids still hang around in trash-filled streets, where, she says, as a girl she used to wait eagerly for garbage day to see what food and treasures she could collect.

The film focuses on such Jamaican musical institutions as the Tuff Gong studio and the Alpha Boys School, springs of Jamaica's prolific music culture. We see the reunion of a couple of dozen of the genre's leading performers including Hopeton Lewis, Ken Boothe, Leroy Sibbles, U-Roy, Dawn Penn, Derrick Morgan, and Bob Marley's backup singers, I Threes (his widow, Mowatt and Marcia Griffiths). The backup band includes legendary pianist Gladstone Anderson, drummer Dunbar and the sweet-voiced male backup group, the Tamlins. If these aren't familiar names, the movie does a good job of leaving a quick, vivid imprint of their individual styles and personalities.

Most of the performances filmed here are being recorded for an album (*Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae* on the Moll-Selekta label), but the moments when the recordings go wrong or the singers improvise are some of most revealing about their creative styles. The film also includes interviews on a Jamaican radio show before a Kingston reunion concert, though only a couple of minutes of that concert are shown in the film. The musicians from the film also played for 125,000 people at the recent Montreal Jazz Festival and, perhaps, that's a promotional strategy in not giving away too much in the film: Rocksteady's music definitely leaves you wanting more.

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