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Rocksteady: Doc recognizes reggae's roots

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ENTERTAINMENT COLUMNIST

Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae

★★★★ (out of 4)

Featuring Hopeton Lewis, Judy Mowatt, Stranger Cole, Marcia Griffiths, Dawn Penn, Lynn Taitt, Ken Boothe, Derrick Morgan, Leroy Sibbles, U-Roy, the Tamlins, Rita Marley. Directed by Stascha Bader. 98 minutes. At Carlton Cinema. G.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Rocksteady's mainstays reunited in Kingston to jam and reminisce about the musical genre .

Taking its cues from *The Buena Vista Social Club*, Swiss director Stascha Bader's *Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae* targets an equally fuzzy period in Jamaican culture post-independence, pre-Rasta – when the small island nation rocked gently to the sounds of unique homegrown rhythms and simple song forms that, under the influence of growing self-awareness and a forceful strain of mystic spiritualism, would soon burst upon the world as reggae.

The music genre of rocksteady lasted only three or four years, from about 1965 through 1968. According to the venerable witnesses and musical participants Bader managed to gather together for one final reunion concert and recording session a couple of years ago at Kingston's legendary Tuff Gong Studios under the assured gaze of Montreal-based producer and reggae expert Mos "Mossman" Raxlen, the musical mini-movement was less a conscious step towards a more potent form of expression than a reaction to what had preceded it in the dance halls and open-air theatres of Trenchtown – ska, with its frenetic rhythms, cheeky horn-and-keyboard punctuation, kitschy lyrics and folksy melodies, and the R&B crunch of electric guitars.

Whether it was the blazing heatwave in Jamaica in the summer of 1966 or singer Hopeton Lewis' sudden admonition to his bandmates to slow down the beat on "Take It Easy" because the ska groove was too hard to follow – both versions have been cited as rocksteady's point of origin – a new generation of young musicians and songwriters felt inspired en masse to leave the past behind and to explore deeper grooves, more ornate melodies, more personal lyrics, and more languid arrangements. Little did they know they were building the bridge to reggae, and that in the flood that followed, rocksteady would become a relic.

In recreating the peculiar magic of rocksteady, Bader overlays his narrative – a loose construct of reunions in Kingston between the genre's surviving, far-flung mainstays, personal and group reminiscences, face-to-camera interviews, live and in-studio music – with a compelling timeline, illustrated by newsreel and archive footage. That timeline places the growth of Jamaica's musical

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expression in the context of its development as a nation, from colonial times in the 1950s through independence in 1962, to the country-to-city migration that forced mass exits in the late 1960s, when reggae's influence began to engulf popular music all over the world.

Unfair as it may be to compare *Buena Vista*, Wim Wenders' ground-breaking tribute to the all-but-forgotten romance ballads and dance-band musicians of pre-Castro Cuba, with *Rocksteady*, it should be said that the latter benefits from the inclusion of the social study lessons that Wenders avoided, but suffers a little in terms of musical substance – I was left wanting more.

It also lacks the kinds of deeply felt personal exchanges between principals Lewis, Judy Mowatt, Stranger Cole, Marcia Griffiths, Dawn Penn, Lynn Taitt, Ken Boothe, Derrick Morgan, Leroy Sibbles, U-Roy, the Tamlins, and the sidemen Ernest Ranglin, Sly Dunbar, Jackie Jackson, Gladstone Anderson, Hux Brown, Bongo Herman and Scully Simms, that took place between the musicians in Wenders' film.

But that's a minor gripe. *Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae*, a Canada-Switzerland co-production, is a rich and rewarding music documentary endowed with a wonderful sense of the significance of its subject, with revealing tales – many told by the film's narrator, Stranger Cole, who advanced the cause of Jamaican music in Toronto's Kensington Market for years while toiling as a metal worker in a toy factory to support his family – and colourful images of contemporary Jamaica.

And with so many rousing, if occasionally foreshortened restatements of rocksteady classics – "People Rocksteady," "Stop That Train," "Freedom Street," "Tougher Than Tough," "You Don't Love Me (No No No)," "Rivers Of Babylon," "(007) Shanty Town," "The Tide Is High" and "Equal Rights" among them – by their originators, now in their 60s, it's a bit greedy to expect more.