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DVD Review: Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae

Mike Dinsdale | 7th May 2011

It's a little-known fact (or at least it was little known until I just came up with it) that Kiwis love their reggae.

Bob Marley felt right at home after visiting these shores in the 70s, and little old New Zealand is responsible for giving UB40 its first international number one (and it's something the band members recall fondly).

As well, there's hardly a Kiwi roots act today that doesn't include a large dollop of reggae in its set.

The laid-back grooves, the choppy guitar and the pumping bass have become a feature in most of our musical lives.

So we've established that almost everybody loves their reggae, but where did it all come from (10 points for all those who said Jamaica), how did it make it this far and what's it all about?

Well some of those questions, and a whole lot more, will be answered with Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae.

In videos and interviews - both recent and historic - from some of the main players, it tells the story of the rocksteady era from 1966-69, which is considered by music experts to be the golden age of Jamaican music.

Rocksteady is blend of ska, soul and R&B, and developed the buoyant rhythms, prominent bass line, beautiful vocals and socially conscious lyrics that became reggae.

There's a lot more to this DVD too.

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As well as being a comprehensive and insightful history into the source of the sound, there's also a wonderful live one-hour rocksteady concert.

Forty years after rocksteady's peak, documentary film-makers brought the remaining great rocksteady singers and musicians together to record an album of their greatest hits to perform live at a reunion concert, and to tell their stories - all of it captured in this stunning film.

Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae features great singers such as Judy Mowatt, Marcia Griffiths and Dawn Penn, Hopeton Lewis, Stranger Cole, Derrick Morgan, Ken Boothe, Leroy Sibbles and U-Roy. Among the musicians are Ernest Ranglin,

Sly Dunbar, Jackie Jackson, Gladstone Anderson, Hux Brown, Bongo Herman and Scully Simms.

A special guest star in the film is Rita Marley, who along with Judy Mowatt and Marcia Griffiths made up the I Threes, Bob Marley's backup singers during his rapid rise to stardom. What they have to say about that historic time is fascinating and revealing.

The artists reunited to take audiences on a trip through time with legendary hits such as Rivers of Babylon, The Tide Is High, No, No, No (You Don't Love Me), Shanty Town (007), Equal Rights, Freedom and Stop That Train.

Anybody with even a minor interest in reggae should watch this amazing DVD.

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styles of music that preceded and influenced it, but I found out a whole lot more watching this.

All things being equal, and if the world is fair, Rocksteady: The Roots of Reggae will do for this musical style what Buena Vista Social Club did for Cuba's ethnic musicians.

I'm going to watch it again ...

Extras: One-hour live concert from the Montreal International Jazz Festival 2009, behind the scenes of the rocksteady concert.

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