



DVD REVIEW BY MICK SLEEPER

During the 1970s and 80s, the nascent Jamaican movie industry created a trio of films that have become cult favorites. The most famous, Perry Henzell's *The Harder They Come* (1973), is an unforgettable, unvarnished snapshot of life in Jamaica; Dickie Jobson's surreal *Countryman* (1984) is a mystic work steeped in Rastafarian culture; and Theodoros Bafaloukos' *Rockers* (1977) is a charismatic tale of violence and revenge set within Jamaica's reggae music scene. Out of the three, *Rockers* is perhaps the most enjoyable to watch, with crisp, colorful cinematography and a vibrant soundtrack. Featuring boisterous dialogue, a terrific cast, and a wonderful story, *Rockers* is simply a treat to watch.

Rockers' off-beat plot involves the adventures of session drummer Leroy "Horsemouth" Wallace (everybody in the reggae music scene has a nickname, and the weirder the nickname, the better). A struggling musician with a strong conscience and hungry mouths to feed, Leroy wants to help his friends in the reggae scene by becoming a record

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salesman, pushing the latest platters by his buddies, and making sure they sell. Hustling together enough money to buy himself a motorcycle to get around the city, Leroy becomes a man with a mission. However, with shades of *Bicycle Thieves*, his prized bike is stolen in the confusion following a police raid on a dance, and Leroy's mission suddenly changes. He is determined to find the thieves himself, not trusting the police to take him seriously.

Leroy takes a job as a drummer with a lounge band at a swanky tourist resort, managed by the sleazy Honeyball (Peter Honiball) and owned by the sinister Mr. Marshall (Morris Williams). When Marshall's daughter Sunshine (Marjorie Norman) takes a shine to Leroy, trouble ensues, as the conservative Marshall is none too thrilled at the prospect of his high-society daughter hanging out with the breezy Rasta drummer. Sunshine discovers that Leroy's bike was stolen by Honeyball's gang and that her father is, in fact, a criminal kingpin with a warehouse full of stolen goods. Upon hearing the news, Leroy enlists the help of his friend Richard "Dirty Harry" Hall to break into Honeyball's warehouse and liberate his bike. In a continuing game of tit for tat, Honeyball reports the counter-theft of the bike to Marshall, who orders a nighttime ambush on the drummer. Badly beaten, Leroy retreats to the countryside to plan his next move. As a devout Rasta, he sees himself in a struggle between good and evil; he *must* get revenge on the criminals and make sure that justice is done. Enlisting the help of dozens of friends, including Sunshine, Leroy plots an intricate Robin Hood-style operation to put things right.

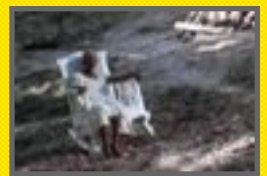
1977 was a time when some of the most potent and brilliant reggae was being produced. As a visual counterpart to that scene, *Rockers* positively sparkles. However, you don't have to be a reggae *cognoscenti* to understand the action; as with *Harder They Come*, *Rockers* is a film that will intrigue non-reggae fans as well. It's very much influenced by New Wave and *cinema-verite* sensibilities. The plot of the film is very loose, and the acting and dialogue have a natural, improvised feel. Director Bafaloukos shoots the entire movie in long takes, as if he's merely observing the action rather than controlling it. Other New Wave touches include a monologue by Leroy spoken to the camera, night scenes



shot where you can't even tell who's who as the action unfolds, and -- of course -- absolutely everything is shot on location. Throughout the film, scenes and action occur which do nothing for the plot but add greatly to the mood and character of the film, such as when Leroy rides his motorcycle into the middle of a soccer game and is rebuked by the players; after making his escape from the hostile team, the story continues as if what we've just seen wasn't supposed to happen. Finally, reminiscent of films like *400 Blows* or *French Connection*, the film concludes without any kind of grand finale or thought of closure; it simply ends.

One of the things that makes *Rockers* such a treat to watch is that the entire cast play themselves. In that context, the plot is created for the characters, rather than the other way around! Rather than being esoteric casting choices, the use of these non-actors is a real plus, as everyone carries themselves very well on-screen. After all, who better to play colorful reggae musicians than colorful reggae musicians? Wallace makes a nice, natural lead, and Hall is a wonderful co-star, both playing their "roles" with boisterous appeal. Hall steals the show in the film's most hilarious scene, when he and Leroy enter a club and discover the DJ is playing American disco, rather than reggae. Hall hijacks the DJ booth and proceeds to spin a reggae tune and raps about himself and Leroy as the club's owner pounds on the door. Gregory Isaacs also makes a splash in his dual role as motorcycle salesman and safe-cracker. The rest of the cast is a virtual who's who of reggae music: besides Wallace and Hall (two of the most crucial session musicians of the day), the film features such reggae luminaries as Jacob "Killer" Miller, Winston Rodney (AKA Burning Spear), Robbie Shakespeare, Kiddus I, Dillinger, and many others in small roles or cameos. And, in a bit of method acting that would make Robert De Niro proud, Leroy's real-life girlfriend Madgie Craig plays herself, along with Leroy's three children. Sadly, some of the stars of the film are no longer with us; the DVD is dedicated to Jacob Miller, Richard Hall, Jack Ruby, Augustus Pablo, and Peter Tosh.

As can be expected, music plays an important role in *Rockers*. The songs often act as musical accompaniment to the on-screen action. Perhaps the coolest example is a



sequence leading to the film's climax, where Leroy's chosen gang all make their way to a rendezvous. One by one, the camera moves with a series of tough-looking characters as they strut down back alleys and streets to Peter Tosh's "Stepping Razor" -- "*I'm like a walking razor, don't you check my size, I'm dangerous*" -- while some might view the sequence as silly machismo, in the context of the film it's brilliant.

The DVD release of *Rockers* looks great, with very few flaws in the print. It probably wasn't re-mastered for this release, but thankfully the film looked good to begin with, no doubt a result of being bankrolled by Island Records when it was being made. The DVD extras include seven bonus audio tracks by the Rockers All Star Band, which play as scenes from the film and behind-the-scenes photos display on the screen. There is also a very nice section of musician and actor biographies, outlining the careers and music of the cast (other than the musicians, Bafaloukos chose a variety of non-actors, such as Peter Honiball, Madgie Craig and Marjorie Norman for roles in the film). Oddly, there is no information on the film's writer and director, Theodoros Bafaloukos, about whom little seems to be known. Probably the most useful extras are a glossary of Rasta terms for those who are unfamiliar with the intriguing slang of the Kingston ghettos, and a capsule summary of Rastafarian culture and the history of reggae music. With these extras, *Rockers* becomes the perfect "edutainment" for new reggae fans and those who are simply curious.

Rockers is a lot of fun, whether you view it simply as a piece of Jamaican whimsy or something more serious. Either way, it's fantastic.

Rockers is now available on DVD from Music Video Distributors. Special features: seven previously unreleased bonus audio tracks, a glossary of Rast a Patois, biographies on the musicians and actors who appear in *Rockers*, photos, and more. Suggested retail price: \$24.95. For more information, check out the [Music](#)

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