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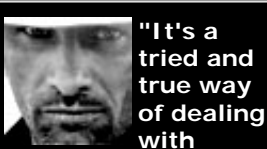
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"It's a tried and true way of dealing with

people or nations that the ruling elite finds troublesome or inconvenient -- whoever gets in our way. They're simply lumped into the enemy pile. "

It's the Culture, Stupid: *Rockers* (25th Anniversary Edition)

by Scott Thill

One of the best sequences found in Theodore Bafaloukos' meditation on Rastafarian culture known as *Rockers* comes when the motley crew of world-class musicians that litter the film like so many star-turn cameos get a chance to individually strut and mug for the camera to Peter Tosh's seminal "Stepping Razor." The context -- they're all preparing to "mash up" a local "Mafia" for stealing and hoarding Kingston's various commodities by raiding his warehouse and redistributing the wealth amongst the poor citizens, Robin Hood style -- is, as is the case throughout most of the film, irrelevant. This is the various Rockers' respective chance to shine, and they plan on taking up all the screen time they need to cash it in. So instead of moving the story or plot forward, as most shots and sequences do, the viewer gets a lengthy succession of Trench Town stars -- such as Robbie Shakespeare, Gregory Isaacs, Richard "Dirty Harry" Hall, Big Youth and more -- decked out in their finest threads walking to and past the camera in gaits that would make any blaxploitation pimp jealous to the soles of his platforms.



Steppin' razors. "*Rockers* is a blunted blast, and its effects are similar to the sampling of marijuana that fill the film like so much sweet smoke. That is, you'll more or less forget exactly where you were, who is who, and what happened if you think about it too hard."

Which is cool with me, and it should be cool with you, too. Because, as was the case with *Rockers'* cinematic ancestor, *The Harder They Come*, conventional film style and construction have no place in a cinema that is scrambling as much as its characters are for a couple of bucks just to get the word out. It's all about the culture, as legendary Jamaican drummer and lead man, Leroy "Horsemouth" Wallace, explains to his common-law (in the film as in real life) wife, Monica "Madgie" Craig; there's no room for possessions or conventions in the life of the colonized, and that includes cinematic staples. Forget that Madgie has three kids with Horsemouth, that she just dropped him some dough to buy a bike to disseminate records to the people, or that he's skeezing on the aforementioned Mafia's — Jamaican patois for criminal — daughter behind her back. There's no room for convention here.

It's the culture, stupid.

If you go that route, *Rockers* is a blunted blast, and its effects are similar to the sampling of marijuana that fill the film like so much sweet smoke. That is, you'll more or less forget exactly where you were, who is who, and what happened if you think about it too hard. At least on the first viewing. As one of his dumbshit underlings counseled the anal retentive Sgt. Stedenko (a hilarious Stacey Keach) in Cheech and Chong's all-time herb classic *Up in Smoke*: "Just go with it." It's better that way.

OK, so here's the plot in a skeleton. Horsemouth wants to bring his music to the people so he goes around asking his homies and his "baby mother" Madgie for dough to buy a moped. Once he gets one, it's stolen by a high-rolling Mr. Marshal (Morris Williams, a member of the early sixties group the Jamaicans) and his henchman, Honibal (the real name of Peter "Honeyball" Honibal, a Kingston restaurateur), and Horsemouth is beaten by thugs for trying to retrieve it. After healing up in the rural wild with a local holy man (Ashley "Higher" Harris, who really does live a rural holy existence in the hills above Montego Bay), Horsemouth returns and, with the help of a stream of reggae and rocker legends, robs Marshal and Honibal blind, dropping the booty off in the yards of the poor.

The movie ends pretty abruptly after that -- I guess Honibal and Marshall just took their pounding like



"You need gas money and a car that

works. Of course, my preference is to do it in the middle of the night! Leave them little presents, you know what I'm saying? Like the Easter bunny."



"Word comes that brother Cat

Stevens refuses to lend his support to our virtuous jihad. May this turncoat's Peace Train be laden with explosives and rammed into the Mountain of Mohammed, peace be upon him."



"I think art and politics are directly

related to each other, and people that deny the cross-influence are kidding themselves."



"Carbs are the new terrorists. Bread is

the new Bin Laden. I can't wait to order a low-carb veggie Whopper. People are pathetic."



"Their job is to sell product. That's what they

do. There are some good bands that come out on major labels, but the majority of it is crap."

the men that they were, eh? -- but, the play is the thing, as William -- no relation to Robbie -- Shakespeare wrote. And Horsemouth and Co. get to play an awful lot.

Like the much worse *Krush Groove* that followed it seven years later in 1985, *Rockers* is a showcase for a daring -- and, at the time at least in the United States, emerging -- musical form's finest practitioners. So the countless sequences of Horsemouth strutting up to a groupa Rastas and slapping five with each of them is less a way of establishing context for the loose story than it is a chance for the viewer to realize not only who these "stars" -- a Rastafarian term of affection -- are but also that, yeah, *they all know Horsemouth*. And indeed, everyone should know Horsemouth, not just because he is partially credited with creating and/or sustaining the now commonplace drum styles you hear all over reggae, rock steady, and rocker music but also because he has in fact played for every reggae artist known to humankind. Which is kinda the case for most of the stars of *Rockers*: they're all famous or familiar faces in their musical genre, and it's nice that someone finally gave them their due even though their last names aren't Marley.

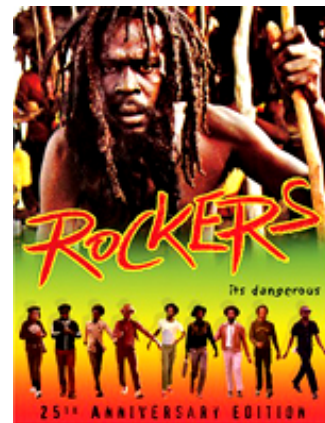
And it's especially cool to catch these hepcats in occupations or situations not involving musical instruments, too. Gregory Isaacs -- who is cheered as he croons "Slave Master" during a filmed concert featuring the *Rockers All-Stars* that is spliced *Iron Chef*-style into the rest of the movie -- moonlights as a safecracker who spends his days ripping off, er, helping bitchy white tourists break into the cars that they locked their keys inside of. Robbie Shakespeare -- one half of the legendary production duo, Sly and Robbie -- is a getaway van mechanic who gets pissed when Horsemouth questions his handiwork. The late Jacob Miller -- of Inner Circle fame, who went on to record the *Cops* theme song, "Bad Boys," after his death -- is more fun to watch when he's pulling a knife and threatening to puncture Horsemouth for mooching on his chicken and breadfruit than he is when he's singing onstage in Marshall's club. Indeed, *Rockers'* most interesting moments emerge via these bizarre self-conscious glimpses into the poverty-wracked Kingston yards that bring these reggae legends down a few pegs.

But lest you forget that they are true legends, music DVD heavyweight Music Video Distributors has put together enough new extras to make you forget that *Rockers* was previously released only a few short years ago. This time around, there are a slew of new features, including interviews with and commentary by the director, new music videos and trailers, a 16-page booklet, a poster gallery, and an interactive Rasta glossary that will make sure you don't get laughed out of a beach bar near you.

In sum: *Rockers* is not for cinema purists, it's for sonic purists, which explains why the film has been resuscitated for the DVD crowd by music video mainstays, the aptly named Music Video Distributors. So those existential creatures with the Clark Kent glasses I see showing up at those Tarkovsky festivals in Berkeley and New York need not apply. But those heavy-lidded dudes who are sparking up Js to the aforementioned *Up in Smoke*, *The Harder They Come*, or even Kevin Smith's hilarious *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* will have a pimp-smacking, spliff-sucking, steppin' razor of a time digging *Rockers*.

And if they get bored watching Horsemouth cruise up to an endless throng of bong-toting dreads, they can just turn the TV off, the stereo up, and listen to the bonus audio tracks as they forage for munchies in the fridge.

30 July 05



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