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Let us all dance to that music

18th September, 2013

When Theodoros Bafaloukos's 1978 film *Rockers* first premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, something bordering on pandemonium ensued. So many soon-to-be fans bum-rushed the theater that the riot police had to be called in. Screening on the same night as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, the small independent film nearly eclipsed the Godfather's latest oeuvre. A review in *Le Monde* read: "*Rockers* is not a film, it is a work of art. So good it is difficult to believe, yet it is real."

Thirty-five years later, the film is canonical in the archives of the grass roots of reggae. With an all-star line-up of reggae's frontline troubadours, the film not only told a first-hand, authentic story during one of the peak moments in the history of the music, it featured the original soul rebels themselves. *Rockers* is one of those films I watch every year because it teaches me, entertains me, moves me and always reaffirms my appreciation of the early foundation builders of a music that has gone on to conquer the world with its unique, utterly unprecedented sound. The film is also an archetypal style guide for how to walk the walk, talk the talk, and suit up and fix up – i.e. how to emote the flash and panache that is a prime boasting right for Jamaica's prevailing all-stars.

Recently I had the privilege of interviewing director Ted Bafaloukos, who is a native of Andros, Greece, and who first traveled to Jamaica around 1975 as a freelance photographer when he was mistakenly arrested on suspicion of being a CIA spy. Shortly after, he moved to the island and lived with the musicians, including his friend Augustus Pablo, and the now household legends Gregory Isaacs, Jacob Miller, Burning Spear, Horsemouth, Dirty Harry, Big Youth, Robbie Shakespeare and Dillinger, who he would eventually cast in *Rockers*. His recollection of filming was as vivid as if he had wrapped production only last week. And from what he said, it was clear to me that the film was more than a labor of love, it was the beginning of a life journey that has continued up until now, a window into a world that was captivating, disarming, potentially catastrophic and at times flirted with immortality. As Ted admitted, "...it's all a spectacular montage in my mind, of intensely-lived moments that I wouldn't change for anything in the world."

Ted described the genesis for his film as "an awakening." During a New York summer in 1975, a young writer friend invited him to a club in Brooklyn to take pictures for an article he was writing for *New York Magazine* about emerging reggae culture in the city. The headlining act was Augustus Pablo. According to Ted, it was a memorable and emotionally charged evening. There was a packed house with an all-Jamaican, suited-up crowd and a band dressed in suits playing reggae. People were dancing and Ted started taking pictures. Eventually Augustus Pablo, "a frail-looking youth holding a plastic instrument that looks like a toy," took to the stage. "Eyes downcast, without acknowledging the crowd, he steps up to the microphone and starts to play," Ted recalled. "The place gets quiet. Even the band seems to be playing inside a sound vacuum. Only his notes fill the room with music that astonishes. I stopped taking pictures. Any picture I took could only show an expressionless young man playing a toy instrument. How could a photograph describe that sound? Nobody was dancing; everybody was floating inside Augustus Pablo's shifting dreamscape. Suddenly, there are gunshots in the back. Screams and panic for a moment. Pablo and the band stay put. In less than a minute it is over. Nobody gets hurt. The shots were fired in the air. The reason – subject to interpretation – a warning, a message for somebody, guys having fun, an enthusiastic response to the music... who knows? Pablo is playing again, his long thin fingers moving over the keys of his Melodica as if he is petting a cat. An ethereal source generating wave after wave of pure happiness."

When I hear him describe that scene, I am transported back to a summer night in 1975 in a Brooklyn club where the consecrating euphoria of early discovery first rooted itself in Ted's consciousness. I have never heard Augustus Pablo play live, just as I have never seen Jacob Miller or Big Youth perform on stage. And so I salute Ted for preserving the legacy of these musical titans and for having the foresight, intelligence and ingenuity to capture them while they were still on the rise, to create a kind of reggae bible that, for fans like me, has become something we carry with us internally everywhere we go. There are no beaches or palm trees or rum punch specials in

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Rockers. Instead there is the tumultuous energy of the streets, the serenading gospel of the sound systems, and the rev and reverb of lion-emblazoned motorbikes. There is the musical radiance of Trench Town. There is the sunlight and the sea air and the liquor dance of the language.

"There is one thing I can say for sure about *Rockers*," Ted said as if he were an outsider looking in. "*Rockers* made itself. Or, more precisely, Reggae made *Rockers*. I was the lucky one to be there. To experience first hand the force, the power of the creative energy that was unleashed with Reggae. The music of the I. Unsolicited, unsponsored, unpatronized, untutored, unauthorized. Music that makes it possible for angels and devils to dance together on the head of the same pin. Not just another success story, not just another trend-setting fad, but the real experience, for those who can hear the call. Let us all dance to that music. Stepping to the amplified rhythms of our hearts as they partake of the divine bliss that only those who have conquered their fears can experience to the fullness of creation."

By Anicée Gaddis

Photo by Blue Sun Film Co.

