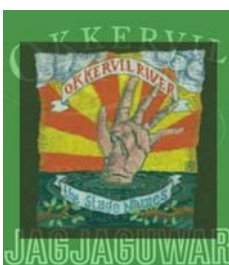




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**Various Artists**

**Deep Roots Music, Vol. 1: Revival - Ranking Sounds [DVD]**

(MVD)  
US release date: 17 July 2007

by **Matthew A. Stern**

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When a documentary gets its DVD re-release in the form of a bargain basement, special feature-free package, there's a tendency to assume that there's something suspect about the film's content. On seeing *Reggae Nashville: Deep Roots Music Vol. 1*'s sparse DVD menu, I wondered if I if I shouldn't prepare myself for a short and uninformative exploration of the careers of a few internationally successful Roots Reggae artists. To say that that isn't the case is an understatement.



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*Reggae Nashville: Deep Roots Music Vol. 1* is an idiosyncratic documentary that does more than just depict the development of Jamaican popular music: the film is entirely immersed in the country's musical culture, language and history. Filled with rare, jaw-dropping original footage of ska, rocksteady, and early dancehall artists, and featuring interviews with pioneers of various Jamaican genres, it's a shame that this documentary didn't get released with the full "Criterion treatment" it deserves.

Structured around video footage and interviews courtesy of filmmaker Howard Johnson on his 1981 excursion to Jamaica, the approach to explaining Jamaica's musical culture isn't what you'd call traditional, nor is it particularly linear. Starting with concert footage from as far back as the '50s, live-in-the-studio performances from the '80s, interviews with major musical figures and impromptu jam sessions, this first DVD in the series clocks in at 100 minutes, giving plenty of on-screen time to unexpurgated footage of dancing; both at religious ceremonies and dancehalls.

Where you might expect to hear the British accent of a stiff, erudite narrator, there is instead the voice of Jamaican / UK Reggae producer and radio host Mikey Dread. Dread's style of narration provides the viewer with a sense of immersion. He poetically recounts tales of Jamaica under colonial rule over Ken Burns effect-treated montages of history book illustrations early on in "Revival". Even more engaging is that Dread actually sometimes starts toasting as accompaniment to the footage of Jamaican ska and rocksteady performances shown.



Miss Lou










Matching Mikey Dread's excitement is Jamaican folklorist and poet Louise Bennett-Coverly aka Miss Lou. Interviewed in the DVD's first segment, "Revival". Miss Lou is the most enthusiastic and amiable academic you could ever imagine. She describes colonial Jamaica, the infusion of Christianity with West African slave traditions, and the connection between early folk songs and later forms of Jamaican music with so much excitement that she occasionally breaks into song mid-interview.

"Revival" then moves from reggae's pre-history into an account of its early days that goes straight to the

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source. In a thick Jamaican patois, Jah Jerry Haines and Noel "Skully" Simms of The Skatalites tell tales of Coxsone Dodd and the days of Studio One that, to the ears of a cultural historian, are as legendary as the tales told by Miss Lou. The aging Skatalites recount what they were listening to at the time of ska's emergence occasionally breaking out into an acoustic jam. The impact is striking; these members of a legendary, genre-defining band aren't living some sort of rockstar lifestyle, they're hanging out in the dirt yard of a shanty town. What we're shown is a depiction of a slice of Jamaican life, one inextricably interwoven with music.

"Revival" jumps around between the '80s, the 60s, and the 1800s in ways that aren't necessarily easy to follow, but that gives a sort of a stream-of-consciousness telling of the political circumstances and religious traditions that made Jamaican music codify the way that it did. Spine-tingling footage of performances of a young Toots Hibbert and a 16-year-old Jimmy Cliff at the heights of Jamaica's '60s ska explosion, is interspersed between footage of religious services past and present.

Unlike in your average music documentary, the rare concert footage runs unexpurgated; rarely does the film cut to another scene in the middle of a song. "Revival" ends by making a brief stop at a Roots Reggae recording session featuring a sweet-sing vocalist, watched in the studio by a spliff-rolling Skatalite Skully and a bleary-eyed producer digging both the music being performed and the food he's eating quite deeply.

The second installment, "Ranking Sounds", begins by returning to the ska days. Johnson interviews Skatalites founder Tommy McCook, who discusses his early interest in performing Big Band music and his having been recruited to play in the Studio One backing band alongside "man-on-the-scene" trombonist, the legendary and tragic Don Drummond. McCook cites producer Duke Reid as the primary impetus behind the metamorphosis of ska into rocksteady in the mid-'60s. This leads the way into the main topic of "Ranking Sounds", the emergence of the Jamaican sound-system and the accompanying DJ culture that has long characterized Jamaican music.

Perhaps the most interesting portion of "Ranking Sounds" is an extended interview with rarely recorded original ska toaster Count Machouki and his buddy, early ska legend Sir Lord Comic. The two elderly gentlemen are shown dressed to the nines (Machouki in a paisley suit, Comic in a red velour track outfit) and probably a bit inebriated. Machouki and Comic vibrantly discuss (and bicker about) the birth of the reggae DJ, the state of music in Jamaica, and the way that it'd progressed by 1981. The segment ends with the two musical progenitors giving a fun and offbeat performance over the kind of electronic dancehall beat that was coming into fashion at the time.

If *Reggae Nashville: Deep Roots Music Vol. 1* were done up like a regular documentary, with a less meandering flow between past and present, with more clearly delineated points in the evolution of Jamaican music, and featuring in-studio interviews with musicologists, it probably wouldn't have the impact that it does. However, a few important additions to the DVD release really could have really helped to drive home the insights that this cultural artifact delivers.

Most immediately missing in this release are subtitles to help clarify a few of the interviews. Fans of Jamaican music are well aware that the patois spoken in Jamaica is quite nearly its own language, and with some of the older interviewees who speak in a thicker dialect, parts of what they say are impenetrable to even the most attentive anglophile ear. It certainly feels like you're getting the "real deal" from the band members and DJs interviewed, but sometimes at the expense of understanding clearly the content of the interviews.

Some on-screen indication of the name of the person being interviewed or shown at any given time wouldn't hurt the DVD. The final performance on the DVD in particular, a dancehall party featuring a performance by Jack Ruby Hi-Fi Sound System doesn't give the names of the DJs taking turns on the microphone. This is frustrating, as each DJ in the sequence is well worth checking out.

*Reggae Nashville: Deep Roots Music Vol. 1* is definitely not geared towards your stereotypical college frat boy with a copy of *Legend* on his shelf and that one poster of Bob toking a spliff on his wall. It's a documentary completely enveloped in Jamaica's musical culture; one that is in some ways similar to American and European musical traditions, and in many ways entirely singular.



With a more ornate release, *Reggae Nashville: Deep Roots Music Vol. 1* could really flesh out the place of contemporary Jamaican artists on the international musical landscape. Since Howard Johnson's trip to Jamaica, there have been at

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Tommy McCook least two big influxes of Jamaican music into Europe and the US. The early-'90s slack-dancehall explosion and the early-'00s cross-pollination of dancehall and hip-hop (not to mention the second two waves of ska) have raised some unique and controversial issues. This documentary and the subsequent volumes of the series only go so far in the evolution of Jamaican music, but there's still a boundless opportunity for special features to explore the country's rich musical microcosm that sadly isn't taken advantage of here.

Regardless of what this installment of the documentary could have been with a more thoughtful release, it remains an unearthed cultural gem well worth the price for any serious music lover. The performance footage alone make it great, but getting to see rare full length interviews with legends, some of whom have since passed on (Tommy McCook in 1998, Miss Lou in 2006) makes it essential.

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