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DVD REVIEWS



title:	English Beat: In Concert at the Royal Festival Hall
studio:	Secret Films
MPAA rating:	Not Rated
starring:	English Beat
DVD release year:	2005
film rating:	Three Stars
sound/picture:	Three Stars
reviewed by:	Dan MacIntosh



When you break it right down, there's nothing particularly English about The English Beat. You may recall how the group was once lumped in with the whole ska movement back in the '80s, mainly because it was on the 2 Tone Records label, along with The Specials and The Selector. But if you listen closely, you hear very little actual ska (which is not exactly a British export in the first place) in the group's songs. For instance, the only horn player in this outfit is the ancient Saxa, who would much rather play mellow jazz than skanking beats anyhow. Furthermore, the group's repertoire contains a bounteous supply of reggae – both fast and slow – as well as other dance grooves. But no matter the style, all of these elements support this act's punkish political attitude, which is possibly its lone true English attribute.

This show, which was filmed at The Royal Festival Hall in London, England, features quite a few of the band's original members. These players include the two front people, Ranking Roger and Dave Wakeling, as well as Saxa and drummer Everett Morton. And except for Saxa, of course, all of these musicians still look incredibly young. Better yet, they also sound great. This healthy 20-song concert has everything you could conceivably ever want from an English Beat show. So for those who weren't able to catch the band the first time around, this disc is a wonderful second chance.

As a personal aside, I had an opportunity to see the band perform back in its heyday. In 1982, I caught the group opening for The Clash. Even though I'd never even heard of the group before that night, I nevertheless fell instantly in love with it. I also saw General Public a few times, which was an extremely poor latter offshoot of The English Beat. Although General Public sported both Ranking Roger and Dave Wakeling, it never matched the charm or the

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song quality of the mother band. My most recent General Public experience, in fact, was little more than a Dave Wakeling show, with the singer supported by a bunch of hired hands. Believe me, it was the palest imitation of the original.

For the most part, The English Beat's songs are timeless. Nevertheless, "Stand Down Margaret," which criticizes England's then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, is about as relevant now as Reagan-bashing would come off if administered in today's American world. Better by far, however, are some of the group's excellent cover songs. Its "Can't Get Used To Losing You," in fact, is better than the original, and had "Tears Of A Clown" not originally featured the great Smokey Robinson singing lead on it, The English Beat's version might have bested it, too.

Although this group has always been overtly political -- especially because of its involvement in movements such as Rock Against Racism -- it was never completely a political act. It also took on more personal issues as well. Narcissism is cleverly addressed on "Mirror In the Bathroom," for instance, whereas "Click Click" takes an accurate shot at suicide.

Other plusses, when it comes to The English Beat, are the contrasting vocal styles of Ranking Roger and Dave Wakeling. On the one hand, Wakeling brings a quivering tenderness to the table. Armed with his bright and rhythmic guitar playing, he sugars much of the group's material through his smooth singing. But when toughness is required, on the other hand, Ranking Roger is the best man for this job. Not only does his toasting take many of these songs to an even higher emotional level, but his Tigger-like bouncing also infuses plenty of visual stimulation into the live presentation.

The group mainly plays it straight here visually, without a whole lot of stage special effects. There is what looks like a spinning wheel of lights filling the stage during "Rough Rider," but that's about it. As for personnel, the musical core of Wakeling, Roger, Morton and Saxa are rounded here out by Dave Blockhead on keyboards, Neil Deathridge on guitar and Andy Pearson on bass. Ranking Junior also joins the group with guest vocals on "Mirror In The Bathroom."

During one portion of this disc's extra interview segment, Ranking Roger explains how it was that a Mojo Magazine request prompted the group to come together for this special reunion gig. He also admits that the General Public offshoot wasn't nearly as good as the original. (But then, we already knew that.) Additionally, during this extended talk, the members theorize that had the group not broken up as quickly as it did, it would have probably had at least a few chart hits in the United States. The band was already playing large arenas at the time of its demise, but its sales growth was possibly limited by the small I.R.S. Records label it was on back then. R.E.M., you may recall, jumped from I.R.S. to Warner Bros. and ultimately the big time. One can't help but wonder how the musical landscape might have changed, and for the better, had The English Beat gone on to become a commercial success, too.

About the closest this act ever got to a legitimate hit was with the single "Save It For Later," which is also played here. With its gentle, jangly arrangement, it's a far cry from much of the group's other more upbeat material, but it also has one of those classically great melodies, which just reaches into your being and grabs your heart. Wakeling sings it with a yearning quality, which is what sets it apart as a true gem. In a lot of ways, it is timeless in the way Crowded House's "Don't Dream It's Over" is. It's pop, but it's not at all sickeningly sweet.

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This return of The English Beat is a little bit like the recent Pixies reunion. Granted, The English Beat was/is not a groundbreaker in the same manner as The Pixies. But it's still a group that was cruelly ignored the first time around. And assuming it did take a realistic shot at getting heard by the public at large again, this time – at least -- it wouldn't be associated with the whole ska movement, which is a category it never truly fit into in the first place. Instead, it would probably be viewed for what it actually is, which is a multifaceted dance combo. In fact, it's hard to think of any good reasons for The English Beat not to reform for good. Let's face it, Dave Wakeling's solo efforts haven't exactly burned up the charts or left much of a lasting mark. And except for a few minor reggae releases, Ranking Roger is mostly one of those "Where is he now?" guys these days. Furthermore, it would be fascinating to hear how Wakeling and the gang would react to the politics of our current terrorized world. We may not have the same kinds of nuclear threats that frightened us back in the '80s, but there are equally scary things happening on the international front today.

The English Beat had something special, which it could never truly replicate after it broke up. But because its members still look so young and sound so good together, I'd be willing to bet that all the magic is not completely gone yet.

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