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Various Artists

Vintage Reggae Bash [DVD]

[Brooklyn 1983]
 (Mvd Visual) Rated: N/A
 US release date: 7 August 2007

by Dan MacIntosh

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When watching this multi-artist reggae DVD, I was trying to imagine what Brooklyn, NY must have been like in 1983. Run-D.M.C would not release their self-titled debut album until 1984, which meant that what we now call old school rap had not yet taken hold of the culture. Nevertheless, disco was long since dead by then and new wave rock was just ramping up. And while Bob Marley had died a few years earlier, there was still a big door of opportunity, at least in the Black community, for reggae to fill the void and make a bigger name for its self. And while the names on this bill are familiar to reggae aficionados, few outside its loyal fan base will recognize many of these nine acts.

This show took place at the Empire Roller Skating Center which is described on the disc jacket as "a go-to spot for skate-world renegades in the early '70s." It was the kind of place where teenagers hung out after school and where families came together on the weekends. But for this night, the building hosted an evening of performances by seminal reggae artists.

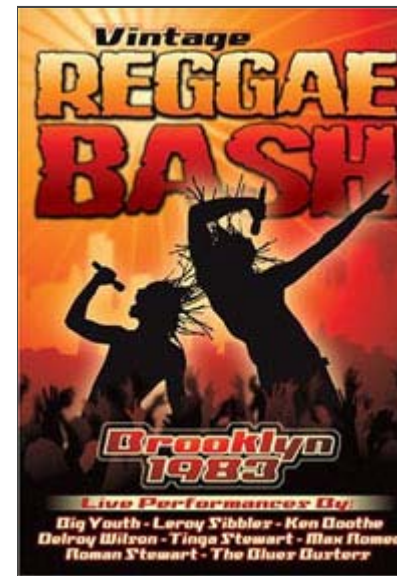
The concert opens with a true Jamaican veteran, Max Romeo. Although Romeo started his career in the '60s, he's probably best known for the track "War in a Babylon" from the mid-'70s. And while no live rendition can match Lee "Scratch" Perry's original studio production, this anthem nevertheless sounds great in concert. Romeo mixes it up a little bit, too, beginning with the chorus from John Lennon's "All We Are Saying Is Give Peace a Chance".

Ken Boothe is also impressive. Wearing a sharp white suit, Boothe has a likeable Otis Redding rasp to his voice. He's also a smooth dancer. He includes the socially active "Freedom Road" in his set, as well as "Don't Want to Say Goodbye", "Moving Away", and "Everything I Own".

The high-voiced Lerory Sibbles also makes a positive impression with his four selections. Sibbles is formerly with the trio the Heptones. And while he performs here without the harmonies of his two former trio mates, he still brings a lot of life to "Party Time", an old Heptones tune.

The appearance of the Blues Busters reveals just how much history is covered by the entertainers on this stage. Lloyd Campbell and Phillip James got their start in the late-'50s, and come off like a sort of Jamaican Sam & Dave. Dressed in red and white suits, they offer a nice throwback to vintage soul days.

Another show highlight is Big Youth's appearance. He gets the most video time with six songs. The lighter side of reggae has made inroads into the pop mainstream, with such songs as



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UB40's "Red, Red Wine". But Big Youth presents the far tougher, more politically rooted sounds. This approach is exemplified by "Every Nigger Is a Star", which takes a Sly Stone sentiment and places it into an extremely confrontational stance; one that would definitely stand out if placed next to an innocuous UB40 track. This is not to suggest that all UB40 music is innocuous; it's just that none of that band's more issue-oriented music ever made the pop charts.

Jamaica sometimes reminds me of England when it comes to producing musicians. It's not an extremely large piece of land, yet it sure exports a ton of talent. This show from 1983 reveals the diverse artistry Jamaica has given us. Styles range from the soul music-inspired Ken Boothe and the Blues Busters to Big Youth's harsh realism. This particular show makes you wonder what the musical landscape would have looked and sounded like, had reggae had become the next big musical wave rather than hip-hop. But then again, such speculation is a Monday morning quarterbacking. Instead of wondering what might have been, just enjoy this DVD for a wide angle view of reggae in the '80s.

RATING: 1 2 3 4 5 **6** 7 8 9 10

— 17 September 2007

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