

## side shots film blog

film news and movie reviews from identity theory

### DVD review: One Love: Words Sounds & Powah (1988/2009; MVD)

In the late 1980s, documentary filmmaker Howard Johnson was given unprecedented access to the Rastafarian community in Britain, resulting in a 10 part series, *Rockers Roadshow*. Some of his wealth of material, shot in London and Nottingham, also was also collected in the *One Love* series, three short films that even today are riveting in their peek into the rich (and ritualistic) world of a religion mostly known through their music, Reggae, their sacrament, weed, and by hip caricatures of both.

The late Jah Bones, Rasta priest and historian, is the common guide throughout the series. His fiery preaching and righteous denunciation of Babylon show him to be a fiery and eloquent spokesman for the faith. In all three films, appearances by other devotees such as Jah Shepherd, Ras Anum Iyapo and Cosmo Ben Imhotep add color and depth to the running oral history presented.

The most fascinating of the three short films is the first, which gives us a rare front row seat at a Rasta prayer service. *Nyabinghi Blood & Fire*. Nyaginhi is a sacred drumming ritual that evokes the powers of nature, including blood and fire, to come and destroy the infidels of Babylon, and to raise up the faithful. Jah Bones' chanting, rhythmic sermon, calling out the agents of evil by name (at the time, Reagan and Thatcher) and being elevated in his passion by the African percussion, is a hypnotic, visceral experience. This rare peek into a sacred ceremony was filmed at the Rastafari Universal Zion church in the Tottenham section of London.

More didactic and thus less gripping is *Blues for Rastafari*. Through historical photos, oral history and vintage footage of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie's mid-60s arrival in Jamaica, this film traces the lineage of Rastafari, from African's exposure to Christianity during the slave trade, through the efforts at liberation by The Universal Negro Improvement Association of Marcus Garvey, to the more recently articulated vision of Rasta as the true faith, with Selassie as God in the flesh and Rastas as an ark in an evil sea. Here those who may be uncomfortable when trying to rationally wrap their head around some of the beliefs and cosmology may find rough going. Yet the same would happen with an overview of any other faith. In that sense, and for those whose interest in Rasta stems merely from music and dope, this short is an eye-opener into the grander meaning and claims of the religion.

Finally, *Words Sounds Powah* is a celebration of "Livivity" the Rasta

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expressed in a concert by The Naturalites, whose smooth, optimistic reggae is s fitting end to the series. The music is the public face of a enigmatic and misunderstood religion that, like all faiths, of offers both gifts and curses to the world.

*One Love: Words Sounds & Powah* is a fascinating, riveting and vital look at a subculture that seems ubiquitous in pop culture, but remains oddly impenetrable. Howard Johnson spent a lot of his creative life trying to uncover some of that mystery, and his respectful but objective films entertain as much as they instruct.



POSTED BY MIKE WOOD AT 7/08/2009 02:08:00 PM

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