

Love and Rockers

Ted Bafaloukos Taught Us Everything We Know About Jamaica

INTERVIEW BY TASSOS BREKOUKAKIS. PORTRAIT BY FREDDIE F.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF THEODOROS BAFALOUKOS

Theodoros Bafaloukos wrote and directed *Rockers*, the film that single-handedly made Jamaica and reggae interesting to couch-cozy white folks, their stoner kids, and a bunch of famous English punks with guitars. Today, Ted is not so reclusive as he is remote, spending his time at his childhood home on the secluded Greek island of Andros. Over 30 years later, we made the long journey for this, his first-ever print interview.

In addition to screenwriting and filmmaking, Bafaloukos was also a production designer for three Oscar-winning directors (Barry Levinson, Errol Morris, Jonathan Demme) and has helped conceive countless famous music videos, including that one for Aerosmith where Alicia Silverstone bungee-jumps off a freeway overpass in a flannel and then flips off Stephen Dorff.

After a brief tour of his house—several hundred paintings and images of magnified snake parts dot the walls—he sat us down and started thumbing his way through some old photo albums. Many of these were from his time shooting *Rockers*. As you'll see, it's a trove of archival happiness.

Vice: How did you first find yourself in Jamaica?

Theodoros Bafaloukos: I went there in 1975 as a freelance photographer for Island Records with a friend, a young guy in the reggae scene. We took photos of faces on the island. It was interesting and exciting. It was also funny because they arrested me as a CIA spy.

Uh-oh. What happened?

I'd gone to a radio station to speak to someone from the community. I wanted to ask him for equipment and for help shooting a documentary—which is what I wanted to do originally. I was in the car with my friend, who was driving, when suddenly, out of nowhere, a man sticks his hand through the window, grabs a small notebook from my chest pocket, and runs into the building shouting “CIA, CIA!” I got out and tried to run after him, but when I got back, my friend and the car had vanished. I was scared. I found myself completely stranded, surrounded by strangers. The friends who had left told me later that they were terrified. We're talking about a time when fear reigned and everyone was scared.

When did the police arrive?

Two jeeps appeared out of nowhere, full of cops—some in uniform, others looking like bouncers. The tougher ones with Uzis pounced out of the vehicle and arrested me. They put me in the jeep and paraded me through the streets at low speed so all could see that they had arrested a CIA agent! They took me to the police station, where it became obvious that they had no idea what to do with me. So they took me to another guy, who interviewed me.

An interrogator?

An interrogator. When I entered the room, the interrogator was seated behind a desk with my notebook next to him. I went over, picked up the notebook from the desk, and put it into my pocket.

Gunsy. What was in the notebook?

The addresses of all the people I had met on the island, mostly musicians. I had promised to send them photographs upon my return to America, which I did.

So did they let you go immediately?

After I put the notebook in my pocket the guy said nothing, didn't even budge. I answered his questions but he didn't even know what to ask me. He had probably made a few phone calls and realized that this was all a mistake.

Looking at pictures of you from this period, you looked more like the lead in a Zapata poem than a CIA agent.

Why, what made a CIA agent look like? [laughs] I had a Greek passport, which made me look even more suspicious. They took it away and kept me there for what seemed like an eternity. Another guy came to interrogate me, but that again led nowhere. It was 10 or 11 at night when suddenly this white guy appears and says, “Come with me,” leads me out of the room, puts me in a cab, and says, “Go, just go.” I said, “What about my passport?” And he said, “Get out of here, man.” So I left. I went to the house I was sharing and found them all there: my friend, Augustus Pablo, the whole gang. They were all younger than me. They were all scared and staring at me as if I had come back from the dead. They basically said, “Sorry, they'll come to kill you tonight and we don't want to stick around.”

Were they teasing you?

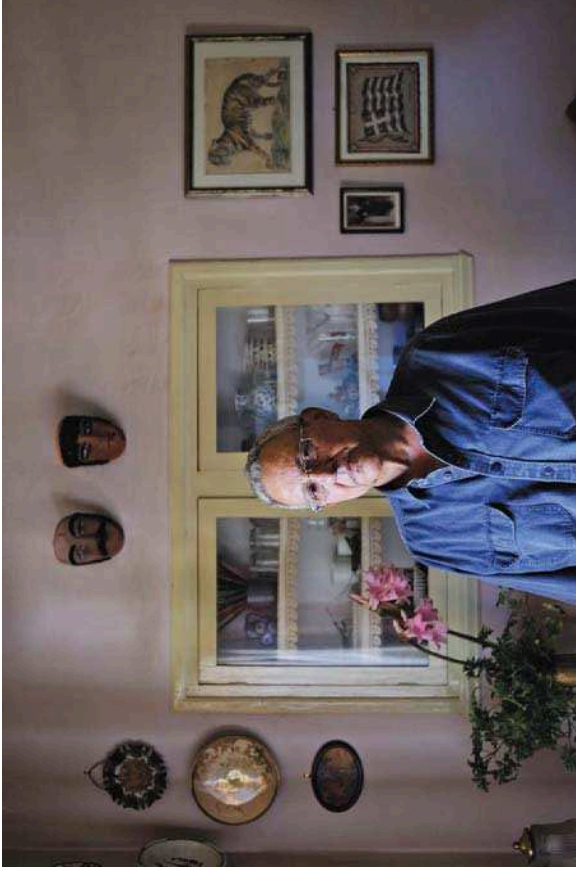
No, they weren't. Stuff like that happened all the time.

This is a completely different picture of Jamaica than the one you present in *Rockers*.

There was this idea that everything was going swell, because of Bob Marley's success. Even for reggae, the reality was different—much harsher. And harsher still for a white guy in the middle of it. I lived there for a couple years before we started shooting. Those Jamaicans living in the ghettos of Kingston were innocent people in their everyday lives and this is exactly what I wanted to capture in the film—a more realistic picture of who they were, or who they really wanted to be. Something like Robin Hood. Jamaica was a fantasy world where reality as we knew it could not exist.

How do you mean?

They lived in a setting that cut them off from the real world. You had nowhere to go; there was seldom someone you could call “Dad.” There were simply men who had relationships with women. There was no real family structure. In most cases, children were not acknowledged, and though you would grow up with a mother, there was nothing there to support you in any way, because it was really tough. It was practically impossible for anything to come out of that situation apart from a tolerance for violence, a gang mentality among young kids as everyone else struggled to eke out a living. But it's important to realize that a great many people managed to live under these conditions peacefully and productively. This was something.



This is Ted at his childhood home on the island of Andros, Greece. We'll let him explain the rest of what you're looking at.



"Me and Leroy 'Hosemouth' Wallace, the legendary pioneering drummer and star of *Rockers*, modelling in downtown Kingston, 1977."



"It was the summer of 1977 and we were shooting *Rockers in St. Ann's*, on the north side of Jamaica. The actors and the crew carried supplies and equipment through the hills to shoot a scene in a ganja field."



"This was known as 'Vibes' Rest,' was around the corner from Randy's Record Shop. Musicians, singers, and would-be singers would lurk about listening to the newest 45s 9/11, waiting to be called in for a session."

How did Jamaica feel to someone from Andros and New York? Really exotic. An unusual experience.

Even more unusual than New York? You're from this tiny village in Greece.

Look, I left Andros at age 17 from this very house, from this very table we are sitting around right now. I was lucky enough to have a very open-minded father who advised me—without pressuring me—to go to the Rhode Island School of Design, one of the world's top design schools.

When was this?

This was between 1964 and 1968—the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll era. After school I returned to Greece during the junta, to serve in the military. In the meantime I married Eugenie—the year we celebrate 39 years of marriage. After my discharge from the army we went to Minnesota, and after that we packed up and went to New York. We became bohemians and lived in an abandoned building in Tribeca.

How did you earn a living?

I worked various freelance jobs. Eugenie worked in the textile industry as a designer. Basically, I kept myself busy repairing the building we lived in and would work odd jobs. I worked as a photographer, until *New York* magazine commissioned me to do a shoot of a young Jamaican at the Tropical Club, a seedy club in Brooklyn. I went there and suddenly Augustus Pablo appeared playing a melodica. I was dumbfounded. He was also the first one I met.

At that point, what did you know about reggae?

I heard Bob Marley for the first time while he was with the Wailers in 1974, totally by fluke. Eugenie and I were on our way to Minnesota and we stopped for a few days to see a friend in Chicago. One night she said, "Let's go to a club with interesting music," and it was Bob Marley. It was an unbelievable gig.

What sort of music were you into back then?

Many things. Mainly rock music and R&B. My wife had two brothers who played the guitar. And lots of blues, of course. If my heart had only begun in a bizarre sort of way through my love for *rebetika*.

Rebetika being a Greek form of the blues.

What happened with *Rebetika* and the blues happened with Bob Marley's music as well. Rocksteady and ska were already around, but when I heard Augustus Pablo I realized that it was something very profound, something over and above what you heard. Reggae had musical depth and a great variety of sounds. If you look at reggae between the end of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s, you won't believe that it was all done by the same 20-year-old people in the Kingston studios. Literally. All these genres emerged simultaneously and from the same musicians—ska, rocksteady, reggae, rock, the dubs.

They were one and the same?

The people who began ska also began reggae: no more than two or three drummers, guitarists, and bassists. The quality of the singers became crucial, their ability to inspire the musicians. The sound was there, and the only thing missing were the little 45 rpm records that had to be cut as quickly as possible—in two hours, even in a half hour—so that costs were kept at a minimum. The recordings would be done in rudimentary studios, the new tracks played in big outdoor dance sessions, over the weekends, traveling with vans chock-full of amps and massive speakers. This was music intended for immediate consumption. Later they began recording 45s on the spot and selling them in just a few stacks or shops. That's how it was. And they sold more in the UK and fewer in the US.

The UK was always more open to reggae.

Yes, the fact that Jamaica was a British colony was a factor in this. It was easier for a Jamaican to go to England than to the US, because of passport and green-card issues. Also, they had absorbed reggae to a greater degree. Bands such as 2 Tone, the Selecter, and others were all very important. I also believe that punk music owes a lot to reggae. They had the same attitude. This was also the reason there were punk covers of reggae tracks.

"My aim in the film was very simple: From the beginning I thought of it as a song, and so the issue was not what to include, but what I would leave out."

Was all this a strictly local Jamaican scene? Was it some sort of ghetto? Very localized. You could call it a ghetto, but it wasn't really. Ghetos in Jamaica were neighborhoods of blocks built around courtyards, like Athens in the 20s and 30s or like African villages. In them were social structures with a life of their own that functioned separately from the broader context, which was the government, the police, the army, and the justice system. The local radio stations seldom played any reggae. They played soul and disco, as did the clubs.

They didn't support their own scene?

It wasn't their own scene, because no one made any money from it. Only a few guys who owned the sound systems made any money. In fact, only two people were behind most of the first releases: Coxtone [Dodd [of the Studio One label] and Duke Reid [of the Treasure Isle label]. When the genre started gaining ground internationally, things began to change, and by the mid-70s reggae as we knew it disappeared. It was impossible for the same people to be in so many bands. There were only enough musicians for five or six bands. Bob Marley took with him some of the best. The others started moving to New York and London. By the end of the 70s, there was no one left. You could say that it all ended with the One Love Peace Concert in 1978.

It's interesting that *Rockers* is missing many of the typical Jamaican ingredients, such as the palm trees and the beaches. Why is that?

It's done on purpose. My aim in the film was very simple: From the beginning I thought of it as a song, and so the issue was not what to include, but what I would leave out. I had to choose. You can't fit everything in a film. My grandmother, who had never gone to school and was a wonderful woman, would watch me draw when I was young and say, "This is too loaded," if I had put in too many elements. In my case, I tried to stay within a certain framework and I did not see myself as a filmmaker, but generally as an artist.

Were you confident your movie would be a success?

I felt that the film was going to be exceptional, but at the same time my mind was fixed on completing it. Anything could happen during the shoot, which could make the whole project go up in flames. One day a kid could pull the trigger and kill someone—this is Kingston we are talking about, a place where 600 kids were killed during that year—and this would be a real disaster. That would be the end. A great part of the population got killed, and most of the time for no reason.

Over what, exactly?

This was gang warfare, but believe it or not the law did not discourage this because guns were everywhere. There was a lust for guns, it was very cool to carry one, and there were also politicians who went around with entire armies of armed guys. The greatest fear was these 11- and 12-year-old kids—you could not tell what they would do next, and they could kill just like that. I think I was very lucky to have completed this film. Every day I lived in fear that someone from the crew or an actor would get killed.

Would you say the scene resembles contemporary hip-hop?

Not really, because the people who lived there and made music were scared stiff of guns. They did not use any themselves. They weren't idiots, you know. They suffered from guns. What makes me view Bob Marley as a hero is that he came back and tried to help establish some order. Of course, he couldn't do this across the board, and there



"The late Richard 'Dirty Harry' Hall. He was a brilliant tenor saxophonist and co-star of the film. This picture was taken in Horsemouth's yard off Marfield Ave. in the heart of Kingston's ghettos in 1976."



"The weed in Kingston was schweg. Horsemouth compensated by smoking large quantities throughout the day."



"The picture of Augustus Pablo presides the Rockers shoot. In November of 1974, Pablo had come to play his first-ever US shows. This was opening night at the Tropical One nightclub in Brooklyn."



"Pablo again, this time with a ukulele on the abandoned ruins of the elevated West Side Highway in downtown Manhattan, 1975."

were many reactions from people in the street. But this effort to bring about a truce and peace stopped the violence for a year. Then it began once again, and before the end of the year both gang leaders were dead. Then cocaine entered the picture.

Did it replace marijuana?

Weed was still there, but it was the cocaine that killed and devastated. There was lots of money involved; people became aggressive and started killing each other, but you could also meet the sweetest and most interesting people—a factory of expressions crammed into such a small place. I am not talking about Kingston. The small, scanty houses built in clusters were more like favelas and less like ghettos. It is in these few places here and there that all the Rasta musicians lived.

Who exactly are the Rastas?

Reggae and Rasta go together, they became a single thing. They became the reason every young guy in Kingston could say, "Yes, now I have a flag, I have a nation, a God, and now fuck you, white guy. And you too, baldy." Marcus Garvey was a key figure in all this. Garvey tried to organize black people and to persuade them to return to Africa. "The black man is not a white man, the black man belongs in Africa."

So racism was prevalent.

Definitely. They would say to me, "Greek man, we don't want anything from you because anything you give us is not yours to give. This is my own life, and my own life is black and can never improve with your care. I want to take care of my life, to control it, and so I will go to Africa, which is full of black people, and I will be part of this other world, of this black life." There was racism even between them, between people with darker skin and those with lighter skin, between the educated and the uneducated.

How did you get the musicians to play roles in your film? In the end, you didn't shoot a documentary.

I lived with them for more than two years and it took me a while to persuade them. It was not something you could impose. What was interesting about the film is that everything was done in reverse: I did the casting first, then I picked the locations, and in the end I wrote the script. They all play themselves. What they say is very simple, even the plot is very lean. I had lived on the island for a while, so I didn't want to shoot a documentary—anyone could do that. I wanted to make a movie on Jamaica's music and include everyone who was there, except Bob Marley.

Why didn't you want him in the movie?

Because he was already a big star and it would become a film about Marley. He would definitely overshadow the other musicians, who were his equals or better, and I didn't want that. I have nothing against Marley, but I really believe that Burning Spear was great, and the same goes for most musicians in the film. For different reasons. I managed to get all the good musicians to take part in it and I think I captured that music at its best moment.

How was the movie received?

Terrifically. It was screened for the first time at the Los Angeles Film Festival in a packed 800-seat theater. It got another screening at the end of the festival because there were so many people who wanted to see it. At Cannes it was screened on the same night with Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and there was an incident with thousands of people, mounted police, and riot police. There were people who wanted to get in, the tickets were all sold out, and maybe they broke out. It was all over the front pages next day. I was intrigued by the reviews in France, even by conservative papers. The first sentence in *Le Monde* was "Rockers is not a film, it is a work of art. So good it is difficult to believe, yet it is real."



"Pablo and friends, with the World Trade Center in the background."



"By winter, we'd finished filming and I'd moved back to New York. Many of the *Rockers* cast came to visit. This is Hoesmouth on the roof of my Tribeca loft."

To what do you attribute this success?

Reggae had become an international genre of music, like samba, rumba, and Cuban music. It had gone a step further, reaching audiences all over the world for the first time. Immediately after the screening, they began treating me like something intriguing. I got proposals from Hollywood, but my mind was set on other things.

Did you make money from the film?

Incredibly enough, no. None. Some people made loads. From the music alone. There were major problems afterward, when the film was done.

What happened?

Things got messy. No one had the experience, neither the producer nor I. No one had ever done anything like it and they had no idea what to do. They thought that it was all about a short little film and they didn't bother getting involved in the process.

The process of promoting it?

They did promote it, but they were left with nothing. They didn't know how to capitalize on it. On the other hand, even if they did, I think they would have done exactly the same. Believe me, it is now, after 30 years, that I have begun making money from it. Through the DVD. After all these years, a check has just arrived for a small sum... a very small sum. It is pretty ridiculous. I didn't make any money from the music either. I would go to Tower Records in New York and would see stacks of CDs and think that others were making money that was mine. I am the soundtrack's producer.

How much did the movie cost?

About \$500,000. I met this producer, a young guy bitten by the film bug who believed in me, and we worked together. I showed him some footage and he said, "Go ahead and do whatever you want." He gave me the go-ahead. Unfortunately he is no longer alive.

Have you kept in touch with the people in the movie?

Most of them are dead. Half were murdered. Dirty Harry, for

instance, was killed in New York. He went to jail for two years, probably for drugs or a fight. I'm not sure, I didn't ask. Six months after he got out of jail someone killed him. The same with Natty Garfield. In contrast, a friend I'd written off as dead is in fact alive. We spoke on the phone recently. I ask all the time, "Is this guy still alive, is that guy dead?" Most of them are no longer in Jamaica.

Did you make many friends?

I was there for so many years, I had to make friends, to open up all my cards. I did not have many, but I wanted everyone to know who I was. There was a time when people from Jamaica would come to our house in New York every day. We lived near Brooklyn, where Jamaicans also lived, but whoever came to town for a gig would also drop by.

Did they respect what you were doing?

Everyone thinks I've made a lot of money. Well, not everyone, but it is difficult to make people believe that I didn't make a cent.

If someone were to hear the title today, they would think that it is not a film about Jamaicans.

The term *Rockers* was very popular during reggae's heyday. There was this new, very sophisticated sound with new drumming systems. Sly Dunbar introduced his own rhythm in a way. Harder. It was a word you'd hear a lot then: "Rock steady, rockers." The producer chose the title. The artwork is mine, as is the poster. I did it all myself because there was no one else to do it.

Who wrote the script?

I did.

Were you smoking a ton of weed at the time?

Of course.

And how was the Jamaican weed?

Awful. Even worse than New York's. ■