

Talisman: Easton's recently reformed Thatcher-baiting, multi-ethnic reggae aces



Skanks very much

A new compilation from Bristol Archive Records celebrates the venerable history of the city's reggae scene. Adam Burrows goes back to the roots.

The year is 1980. Margaret Thatcher is at Number 10, youth unemployment is exploding and the sound of the inner cities is about to change British music forever. As an uplifting bassline emerges from a nightmare cacophony of police sirens and smashing windows, an accusatory voice calls “OK, Babylon... who pay your earning to set Bristol burning?” The song is ‘Riot’ by 3D Production. You probably haven’t heard it yet, but you should. ‘The Bristol Reggae Explosion’ is an eye-opening release from Bristol Archive Records, charting the city’s overlooked contribution to reggae. From the authentic roots style of Joshua Moses to the dub stew of Restriction, this forgotten music stands up with the best of British reggae – bands like Steel Pulse, Aswad and Misty In Roots. “Before Massive Attack and Portishead, the M4 might as well have been on Mars,” says Dubmart’s Martin Langford, who wrote the sleeve notes. “The people on this compilation didn’t reap the rewards.” Ironically, their rare recordings are now in such worldwide demand that “a nice copy of the Joshua Moses 12” will

“MUSIC IS WHAT WE DO, MAN. TO UPLIFT OTHER HUMAN BEINGS, TO SHOW THEM WHAT LIFE SHOULD BE.”

JABULANI NGOZI, BLACK ROOTS

set you back £100”. In most cases, this is the first time these songs have been released since their initial small runs on vinyl. The album opens with ‘Bristol Rock’, a 1981 masterpiece by Black Roots. Inspired by the grave of Scipio Africanus at Henbury, it relates the experience of black Britons to that of a West African youth who died in captivity 250 years earlier. Haunting and provocative, it can’t have been far from John Peel’s mind when he said: “If anyone tells you that there is no such thing as good British reggae, first tell them they’re a

herbert, and then listen to Black Roots.”

“We came from Jamaica at a young age,” remembers Jabulani Ngozi, the band’s rhythm guitarist. “We went through the school system in Bristol. We tried to get work, but work was not easy to get.” The band grew out of a soundsystem that played unlicensed ‘blues’ parties in St Pauls, and the community’s support was crucial. “Without it we would never have made our first single,” says Jabulani. ‘Bristol Rock’ was funded by proceeds from their first concert, attended by 1,200 local people.

Black Roots applied reggae’s language of struggle to Thatcher’s Britain. “Everything was going against the mass of the people,” Jabulani says. “We wanted to rise up against *all* of that. The music was there to ease that depression away.” By 1981 they were playing to 2,500 people, supporting John Holt at Hammersmith Palais, and they went on to record 10 albums and numerous sessions for Radio 1 without ever signing a deal. “EMI had an interest in us at one time, but they wanted us to go a certain way. They wanted us to make the lyrics a little more *conservative*.” While their uncompromising attitude limited their success, it didn’t stop them becoming

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a live sensation. They played with everyone from Jamaican stars like Eek-A-Mouse and Toots & The Maytals to homegrown icons like Linton Kwesi Johnson.

Their challengers for Bristol's reggae crown were Talisman, a band from Easton. While both groups were big draws on the student circuit, they never played together, and there was a bit more to their relationship than professional rivalry. "It never came to fisticuffs, but there was definitely an extended vibes," says Bekele, Talisman's frontman. Mike Darby [see panel] has described 'The Bristol Reggae Explosion' as "a personal crusade to get Black Roots and Talisman on the same record".

With influences from rock and African pop, Talisman had a wide-ranging appeal, but they didn't pull their punches. Their classic 'Dole Age' describes Margaret Thatcher as "a criminal" who "dig out me belly and cut out me tongue". Talisman were a multi-ethnic group at a time when – in Martin Langford's words – "reggae was seen as an fundamental part of West Indian culture. I'd be looking through the reggae section in a record shop, and black kids would say 'you shouldn't be looking at that', but it cuts both ways. My African friends would get spat at in the street just because they were black."

Bekele agrees. "The thing back then was 'white boys can't play reggae'," he recalls, "so for us to have two white band members, that was unusual. There were very few white boys who could mix with a reggae band, or go to blues." The mix worked in their favour, though, combining with their hypnotic live sound to bring in a varied crowd. Soon they were playing with bands like The Clash and Killing Joke. "The punk crowd identified with our philosophy," says Bekele. The band's crossover success peaked with a support slot for The Rolling Stones at Ashton Gate – "our one and only stadium gig" – but Talisman's success as a live band didn't translate into big sales. "We didn't think about the business side – we just saw the audiences and wanted to play to them."

By the late 80s, live reggae was in decline, and bands like Black Roots and Talisman began to wind down. The new digital dancehall style drew Jamaicans away, while Britain was transformed by a crumbling of cultural barriers. "Reggae defeated itself by infecting everything else," says Martin Langford. "Hip-hop, house, jungle, garage... black youths had a new British identity, and they started creating music to reflect that." Bristol's music was particularly transformed by the rhythms and dynamics of reggae. As half of Smith & Mighty, Restriction's guitarist Rob Smith went on to be an architect of the 'Bristol Sound', while Talisman have reportedly been cited as an influence by Massive Attack.

It's hard not to see "The Bristol Reggae Explosion" as a timely release. "I don't know what other forces are at work," says Bekele, "but the Conservatives are back

The Bristol Reggae Explosion takes over Gloucester Road's Plastic Wax record store
 Below: seminal outfit Black Roots



in power and their policies are throwing up unemployment again." Talisman have reformed, and are playing The Fleece on Fri 27 May to celebrate the release of their 'Dole Age' retrospective (Venue's had a sneak preview – it's great). Meanwhile, 2010 saw Black Roots play their first gigs in 20 years, culminating in an emotional homecoming at Trinity. "We seen a lot of old faces," says Jabulani, "still running and jumping and singing along like we hadn't gone anywhere." He's writing songs again, and hopes to have a Black Roots album out by the end of the year. The message from both bands is clear – if people want them, they'll play. As Jabulani puts it, "music is what we do, man. To uplift other human beings, to show them what life should be."

'THE BRISTOL REGGAE EXPLOSION 1978-1983' IS RELEASED ON BRISTOL ARCHIVE RECORDS ON MON 21 FEB. SEE WWW.BRISTOLARCHIVERECORDS.COM FOR MORE GREAT BRISTOL REGGAE, PICS, RECORD SLEEVES AND POSTERS.

SOUND FOUNDATIONS

The man behind 'The Bristol Reggae Explosion' is Mike Darby (pictured) of Bristol Archive Records. Founded in 2001, the label went into overdrive three years ago when, Mike explains, "a friend of mine – Dave Bateman of the punk band Vice Squad – dropped dead unexpectedly. It made me realise you need to acknowledge people before they disappear."



For Mike, it's not just about music: "It's as much about the social history. Rather than talking about the blokes who built ships, I want to talk about something from my generation." Focusing on the years 1977-1990, the archive has already produced more than 200 digital releases, as well as lovingly produced compilations like 'The Bristol Punk Explosion' and its new reggae counterpart. Mike believes that if the archive didn't exist, much of the music would be lost forever. "Bristol's a very special place," he says, "but it's free-form, arty... people record a few brilliant tunes and then split up and form a new band." The label has customers all over the world, from German punks to indie fans in Japan, but Mike believes the reggae collection has an appeal that goes beyond its genre. "Anyone interested in Bristol's music needs to hear it," he says. "These are the bands and musicians that enabled the Bristol Sound to happen."