

The Beat: a political old-skool revival

Amid a global recession and the launch of a new Margaret Thatcher biopic, politically-charged '80s UK ska revivalists The Beat are more relevant than ever. Ahead of their Dubai gig, toastmaster **Ranking Roger** spoke to *Rob Garratt*

'It's the same, looking at racism and unemployment and war – it's exactly the same,' says Ranking Roger, assessing the 32-year gap between now and when his band The Beat released 'Stand Down Margaret', a stinging vignette demanding the resignation of then-British prime minister Margaret Thatcher. In the wake of new film *The Iron Lady*, chronicling the life of Britain's longest-serving leader (and set for UAE release on February 9), the singer has found his band thrust back into the limelight as journalists gather to dissect Thatcher's divisive legacy.

The Beat were one of a handful of bands, alongside The Specials, Madness, Bad Manners and The Selecter, that grew from the UK's Midlands in the late '70s to define a new musical style. The genre, known as 'two tone' after the 2 Tone label to which many of the bands were signed, saw young white and black players take elements of Jamaican rocksteady and ska records and inject them with the aggression and politics of punk.

After three successful albums, The Beat split in 1983, with Roger going on to play with members of The Specials in The Special Beat and in Mick Jones's post-The Clash band Big Audio Dynamite. Then, almost a decade ago, Roger spearheaded a reunion of The Beat without original co-vocalist Dave Wakeling, who now leads his own incarnation of the band, The English Beat, in the US. Chatting to the 48-year-old from his Birmingham home, it is this touchy subject on which our conversation begins.

Right, so what happened again?

Me and Dave have our differences. We also live 12,000 miles apart. At the moment we're talking – we're talking to record companies to negotiate reissuing the back catalogue, so we have to talk. I'm not trying to say anything bad because it might make it worse. I have my idea and he has his idea – mine is a cultured blend of reggae and ska and punk; his sounds like artificial Las Vegas... I shouldn't really be making statements like that.

You'll be remembered for the tune 'Stand Down Margaret'. Will you go to see *The Iron Lady* when it's released in cinemas?

Yeah, I really must go to see that.



Ranking Roger today...

Speaking of kids, how did you come to bring your son, Murphy 'Ranking' Jnr, into the band?

I invited him because he seemed interested – he wanted to come on stage and MC, and the crowd loved it. So when we reformed I brought him in and he's been there ever since.

Do you think there should be more protest songs today?

There's a time for protest songs and now's the time. There's a lot of rubbish in the world and you need people to stand up and say what you should and shouldn't be doing. I want to see someone aged between 18 and 24 – we need a Bob Dylan or John Lennon or Bob Marley – that will catapult a wave of conscious lyrics.

You've toured with a lot of great artists – David Bowie, The Clash, The Police, R.E.M... Who made the biggest impression?

The Clash: I've never met anyone like that. They'd be in the dressing room swearing at each other, totally different personalities, nice ones and



...and (third from right) during the band's '80s heyday

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When we put out 'Stand Down Margaret', we were banned from radio and TV. A year later she stood down. From that day we've been seen as heroes.

Have things changed much since 1980, when you released that song?

It's the same, just a generation older, and we didn't educate them.

Do you have any sympathy for the London rioters who caused so much trouble last summer?

None at all. At least when people went out rioting in the '80s it was for a reason – people didn't have money and were unemployed and living like refuse. The rioters last year were kids who had no reason; it was kids on holiday.

aggressive ones. As soon as they went on stage and made that sound, it was so much better than the records. I didn't like Clash records until I saw them live.

In Dubai you're on a bill with rappers Arrested Development. What do you think of them?

I've always respected them. I think they're cool and they speak about reality and what's going on in the streets, they're politically aware in their own way. We're very different bands, but it should be a good gig. *The Beat and Arrested Development play at Chi@The Lodge on Thursday February 2 at 9pm. Tickets Dhs150 regular, Dhs250 VIP (04 337 9470).*

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