Dread Beat an' Blood and Reggae, part of the "Rock Routes: Films with a Beat" series. Now showing at Off the Wall.

A double bill of British reggae films begins Off the Wall Cinema's five part music series, "Rock Routes: Films with a Beat". Dread Beat an' Blood and Reggae both offer an insightful look into the English reggae scene of the seventies. As with many of Off the Wall's features, independent filmmakers with more talent than money are responsible for these rather peculiar, but interesting, productions.

Reggae is Horace Ove's cinema verite record of the 1970 Caribbean Music Festival in Wembley, England. This innovative motion picture technique combines film from the concert with interviews of disc jockeys, club owners, and record company people, providing an expose with commentary on reggae music and its place in the United Kingdom. Extremely competent editing interludes the music of the Maytals, Desmond Dekker, Black Fash, and others with unscripted sequences depicting the black culture of Jamaica. Scenes of fire walking and limbo dancers perfectly complement the mood and rhythm of the hands. One rather creative sequence contains tinted footage of King Kong inserted within a song.

As Reggae looks at the music, Dread Beat an' Blood looks at the man. Linton Kwesi Johnson: poet, teacher, librarian, sociologist, and musician is the one of the most potent black voices in England today and is the focus of this 1978 documentary, produced and directed by Franco Rosso. Johnson is known for his outspoken stand against racism in the UK and the strength of his musical and social work. He has been denied a visa to the USA on the grounds that he's too politically sensitive.

Johnson's poems about racism and black urban life in England are written in Creole, his native language, and chanted to a reggae beat. His style is compared with that of the Jamaican "toaster" poets. DJs who recite improvised lines over a background of reggae music. But unlike the "toasters," Johnson's lyrics and music are well-integrated: he writes down the words first and lets the music naturally flow from the paper.

The film is like Reggae inform. We follow Johnson from an outdoor market to the recording studio and through poetry readings and social work, leading to a recitation at a demonstration to free George Lindo, a black man framed on a robbery charge. The movie gives the viewer a documentary look at the black working class community in London and highlights it with Johnson's musical activism. Even those who have never heard of Linton Kwesi Johnson will be impressed by his philosophical determinism and vocal expressiveness as presented by Dread Beat an' Blood.

If you're "into" reggae, this pair of flicks will be right up your alley. If you hate it, forget it. But if you're even lukewarm or ignorant of the style, this Off the Wall presentation may give you a fresh look at a unique musical genre and an inside view of its steadfast following. But never de less, ef does films got a goal, eets to convince us, dat reggae got soul!

Mark DeCew

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