

RUDE BOY DREAM

# Ska with Laurel

Conducted on  
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third annual PSU Skafest  
State College, Pennsylvania  
Photography & layout by Jav



**You started performing even before any ska music proper had even begun. What was that like as a musician in those days? What were you singing besides calypso?**

Besides calypso? American rhythm and blues is the roots, the roots of ska music. Most people don't say that, but American rhythm and blues has something to do with it... With ska. In the fifties, that's all we used to dance to and sing in Jamaica.

**Like American blues player Roscoe Gordon. Would you say he was an influence?**

Well he influenced lots of people in Jamaica in those days and we got guys like Smiley Lewis, Big Joe Turner and all that, you know? Then we mix the calypso with rhythm and blues and they become ska. They was ska.

**What are your feelings about the 1990's ska music today? (To paraphrase Jimmy Cliff) "Ska all over the world?"**

Well, I like some, I don't like some. Like oh, some people like some of my tunes, some people won't, or don't like them and that's that's the way it goes. You can't tell people how to play ska, you get what I mean? If they got a way that they feel ska should be, and they wanna play it that way it's okay, you get what I mean? Right

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now I'm doing lots of different things as well musically. I'm recording some ska with some different elements. You get what I mean? Not just a sounding like the original thing from what I know, from Jamaica. I'm adding something to it to attract more young people to the music.

**What was your first big break as musician?**

As a musician? Well, my first break in the music business was when I won a contest in Jamaica. And from there, I took it a bit serious, and serious, and more serious. I was singing since I was 10 or 12 years old. You know I'm a Cuban and I speak Spanish fluent?

**Yes.**

Good, well I been singing since I've been in Cuba.

**So your mother was Jamaican and your father was Cuban?**

Where? Where did ya get that?

**I read liner notes. (Laurel laughs)**

**Which is why you moved from Cuba to Jamaica? [circa 1938]**

Yea, yea. Ya got it right, ya got it right. (Long pause) I just recorded an album in Spanish in Madrid about 2 months ago.

**Really? You say its all different kinds of stuff? Different kinds of music?**

No, it is twelve tracks, and the twelve tracks of Spanish.

**In the past you've been backed by a number of bands in England. (The Potato 5, The Loafers, The Busters, Freetown, House Of Rhythm, etc.) Do any particular ones stand**

**out ahead of the pack throughout the years?**

Well everyone stands out for me, but the band I like the most is my band, The Pressure Tenants, from England. (long pause) But I've liked... I love lots of bands that I play with and bands that I don't play with. I love a... I like Doctor Ring Ding, and ay I like this one here... (pointing to Dan Vitale) Bim Skala Bim.

**Bim was some of the first ska I ever heard.**

Yeah, and I like a ...New York Ska Jazz. They're very good, a very good band.

**In "Sally Brown" one of your biggest hits, was that a tune about a real person or is it just a fictitious story? (Laurel laughs) And if it is about a real person...**

Aaa, no it's... no, the fiction. The fiction. But I've gotten lots of good mem'ries of Sally Brown. The first time I played it in England.. no, here in America, it was with Bad Manners. When we finished doing the concert and I came out of the hall, walking down to the motel where it was, it wasn't very far so I decided to walk. I saw about ten skinheads running behind me and I said to myself (Laurel gets a look of shaky nervousness; clenches fists), I said to myself, I thought they was going to beat me up or something like that. And they stop me politely, and they said, "Mister Reggae, But I would like to know what is a cukumaka stick?" I was like this (arms over head in a cowering gesture) please don't beat me up. And I was glad for that because I explained what was a cukumaka stick.

**It's a stick for the cukumaka drum, no? A drum stick?**

No, No, not a drum stick.

**There's a cukumaka drum as well.**

In Carribean culture, its a stick that you cut. It's a tree and you cut a limb off of this tree in Jamaica and you put it to be dried, and if someone messes with you, you just take it and whack! That is a cukumaka stick.

**When you were scared of those guys chasing you, did you wish you had one?**

No, no, because I'm not violent. I'm not a violent person. And they really weren't chasing me, they just wanted to catch up with me to ask me what was the meaning. So I.. (pauses) Cukumaka stick again in Jamaica, it means a wack from that stick that they hit you with. For example, if a girl... You're passing a girl and you try and chat her up and she looks at you funny (priceless face) like that, ay you'd say "You're going on like you're nice, I'm gonna hit you with a cukumaka stick!" But then its not a weapon. [It's not hit you with a cukumaka stick]

**It's just an expression?**

No. It means, you wanna get hit with a cukumaka stick (points to genitals)

**Okay, gotcha. (laughter)**

Ya get what I mean? That's that. Ya gotta be careful on how you express that. But it's just a joke, they say it in

# aitken

EL CUBANO, THE LEGENDARY 'GODFATHER OF SKA' HIMSELF

Jamaica anyhow, in those days. I'm gonna hit you with a stick. But that's what a man would say to a girl.

**You recorded a CD with the Skatalites this past summer? Any thoughts on that?**

No, No that was recorded about 1960? In 1963.

**Really? How did that do? I mean has it been released? Do your fans know it well?**

I don't know because I don't... I haven't released it. It's a company in Germany that has recently released it. The company in Germany called (pauses) ...Grover! Grover Records.

**You've played a lot of ska festivals**

Yes.

**Do you notice the American ones are very different from those in Europe?**

I've never played in a ska festival in America.

**No? This is your first one?**

This is a festival?

**Yes.**

No one ska festival is the same.

**Any thoughts on why ska is not treated as a serious musical form? From for instance the perspective of a sophisticated classical background or just other musicians. People tend to look down at and generalize ska as a sort of zany circus joke and it's not serious. Or do you disagree?**

Ska is a serious music. But I don't know, I can't tell you why people might not take it for a serious music.

**It's a question that I've pondered over for a while. Do you still keep touch with (Island Records' founder) Chris Blackwell?**

When I do see him. You know them, those men are millionaires. (long pause)

**In your forty year career have you ever gotten tired of being a performer?**

No, but I am tired of getting small money. And a...not the right...not the right...like, like today I came here. You don't get the right place to rest and etcetera, you know?

**That's ridiculous. You must get interviewed a lot?**

(Nods) All the time.

**How do you feel about that? Like it or not?**

I like it because so many people talk crap, trying to be big stars and they're not big stars. I am not a big star. I am just... a shining star. (laughter) Don't make that, its just a joke, just a joke. I never think of myself as a star.

**During the long hot summer of '68 in Jamaica, rumor has it the heat is what made ska slow down to rock steady. Is that true or was it just musical change, progress?**

Nah. Don't think all that they say. They ain't got a clue.

**That's why I ask. You were involved then, you might know.**

I've been there since the creation... of the music.

**One time I saw you perform at the Wetlands in New York City. There was a fight amongst some skinheads. Does such violence regularly happen at your shows? I was surprised.**

Aw, you know skinheads when they get a bit nice and drink their drink. A normal little fight, but they don't really mean anything, you know. I've got lots of skinhead friends and to tell you the truth, if I go to.. If I'm doing a show and there's no skinheads around, I don't feel safe. Because I've got lots of skinheads that love me and like me, from years ago in England when they used to follow me around and support me. *[sometimes quite literally - ed.]* So I like skinheads.

**How did the moniker of 'Boss Skinhead' come about?**

**Was it your own doing or was it your working-class audience who gave it to you?**

No, no, you mean Boss Skinhead. No, I *(lifts off his hat)* just got a skin head. One time I just said, 'This is your boss skinhead speaking'. So boss skinhead is not a name I gave myself. Also, the name Godfather of Ska. In the band a man gave me that name and it stuck. So I didn't get that name neither. I *(pause)* I am, but when my band performed in London at the club called Gaz's Rockin Blues [The Trojans' Gaz Mayall's club] and they announced "...and now we bring to you The Godfather of Ska,, This is Laurel Aitken & The Pressure Tenants!" That was the name of my band and everybody laughed. The next week it came out in the *Melody Maker*, "Godfather of Ska," and that was it. Even if I didn't want to be called the "Godfather of Ska," I couldn't resist it because that was out there. But I never call myself Godfather of Ska. Maybe I am, but I never say that...

**Well you were there from the creation of the music. Like you said, from its beginning.**

Yea, everybody all know their history of Jamaican music. In the history, they'll tell you who I supposed to be or who I am. I'm in the Jamaican music from the beginning, even from before calypso and ska came in, 'cause in the 50's you had to sing songs like... You know "Blue Moon"? Those standards from then. You had to sing those things in those days, no ska, no.. well calypso was there all the time because that was the Jamaican music then, even though it was from Trinidad. I used to work with a tourist board in Jamaica. I used to have a big, big a shirt, you know those sexy style Carribean shirts, with a broad hat like that *(broad hat hand gestures)* with a shaker singing for the Jamaican tourist board. I was singing "Welcome to Jamaica where the rum come from," shaking like this *(shake)* and the

tourists would give me money. I had a job to welcome tourists from, when they coming off the ship. So I've been involved. I've been involved all this time.

**I know you're a busy man with other things to attend to, so I'm going to shake your hand and say thank you very much for your time and all your music.**

What's your name?

**John.**

John.

Thanks again.

**Much respect & special thanks to Rocksteady Freddie Reiter, Fritz and Dan Vitale, all of whom played integral roles in setting up this boss session for you & I.**



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