

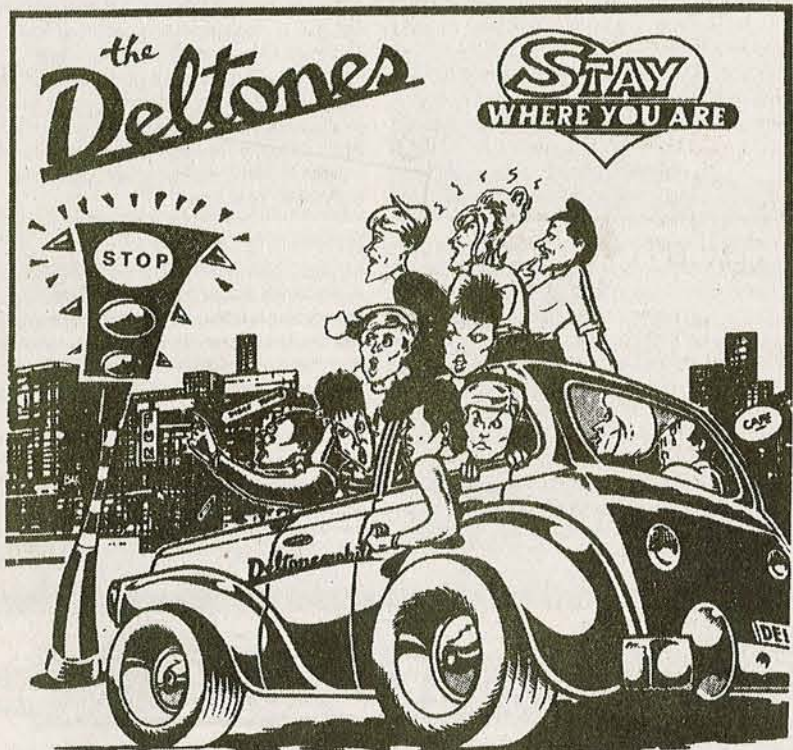
# Unicorn Records

and "The New Ska Classics"

The Blueprint of Ska Today?



## READY .. STEADY .. SKA



LONDON SKA FUN FROM THE CARTEL

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UNICORN RECORDS, 191 Seven Sisters Rd, Finsbury Park, LONDON N4 3NG

In past issues of TPSA, I've had coworkers contribute pieces, including 'Little' Abby Van Deerlin and 'Big' Buck Hingley. This time around, we have Moon's minister of propaganda, Steve "Maxed Out" Shafer educating us a bit on a crucial ska label that covered the hardcore ska scene back in the late 80s, back when Moon was still young on the scene. Yeah, it's impossible for me to be totally ethically unbiased as editor/publisher

er of TPSA and a Moon employee, and it goes the same for Steve - tough, it's my zine and I'll do what I please!

Unfortunately when you mention Unicorn to many of the artists involved, you'll come away with a bitter taste in your mouth....

I find it very funny when I hear or read about someone complaining that Moon Ska releases "too many ska records" (as I do work for Moon, I should disclose), because I remember a time when ska records were few and far between -

and the so-called 'third wave' ska was not equated with ska-core and ska-punk. Back in the late eighties, the US ska scene was pretty much limited to New York City, Boston and L.A. Only a handful of US ska records existed, so few I can rattle them off here: **The Toasters** "Recriminations" EP, "Skaboom" and the new "Thrill Me Up," **Bim Skala Bim's** "Jah Laudromat" and "Tuba City," **The NY Citizens'** "On the Move," **Fishbone's** ska EP, **The Untouchables'** "Wild Child" and the "NY Beat" and "Skaface" compilations (and did anyone else ever pick up **The Offs'** excellent "First Record", with its *Jean Michel Basquat* cover besides me?).

However, ska music was boiling over in Europe and the label that was leading the way was UK-based **Unicorn Records**. At the demise of 2-Tone era ska, around '83 or '84, the last records weren't really even close to ska. Before the rise of the US ska scene in the early-to-mid nineties, the only ska scenes that were thriving were the UK and German ska scenes. While at the time there were several labels releasing amazing ska records, such as **Link** (and their Skank imprint), **Staccato**, **Ska Records**, **Pork Pie**, **Weserlabel**, **Gaz's Rockin' Records** and **Buster Bloodvessel's** too short-lived **Blue Beat Records** (all either German or UK indies), the one label that unified the European and worldwide ska scene was Unicorn -- and in its heyday (approximately 1988-1991), it released a stunning amount of quality ska music.

Unicorn was founded by **Mark Johnson** in 1986 and, at first, the label primarily released power-pop. Unicorn's first foray into ska was their release in December 1986 of **The Toasters'** "Pool Shark" EP - and by the time of its demise in 1991, the label had produced some fifty odd ska titles, from such top-notch ska artists as **Laurel Aitken**, **The Toasters**, **The Deltones**, **Potato 5**, **The Busters**, **Skaos**, **No Sports**, **The Donkey Show** and **Derrick Morgan**. Additionally, Unicorn carried ska titles from all of the aforementioned labels, as well as ska imports from around the world, whatever sixties ska releases were then available and a good collection of mod, r&b and soul.

I first came across Unicorn during the fall of 1988, when shopping at **Bleecker Bob's** on 3rd Street in Manhattan, which always carried a good selection of ska music (and *Venus Records* on St. Mark's, if I recall, was well-stocked, too). The record was "Skankin' Around the World: The International Ska Compilation" and when I looked over the credits it featured **Bad Manners** (UK), **Potato 5** with **Laurel Aitken** (UK), **Skaos** (Germany), **Mr. Review** (Holland), **Blue Chateau** (Germany), **The Deltones** (UK), **Bim Skala Bim** (US), **Saxawhaman** (France), **Kortatu** (Basque Country), **Spy Eye** (Italy) **The Toasters** (US) and **The Donkey Show** (US). I hadn't heard of most of these bands - and who knew that **Bad Manners** were still around? I paid my \$13.99 (not too pricey for an import) and headed uptown to give it a listen. When I made it home and put the LP (remember them?) (you old school

*muthafugga you!* - Ed.) on the turntable, I was blown away by every track on the album. 2-Tone ska was being taken to the next level - and reinterpreted in all sorts of new ways, from **The Deltones'** 60's-girls-group-goes-ska, to the **Potato 5's** re-invention of traditional Jamaican ska, to **Kortatu's** punky rollercoaster ride and **Spy Eye's** new wave-ish ska sound. To this day, "Skankin' Round the World" stands as one of the best ska compilations ever issued! (At the time this record was also released on CD in the US on *Celluloid's* ska subsidiary, *Skaloïd*, which had released the first two **Toasters** CD's.)

I was hooked. On the LP jacket, it instructed the curious to 'send 2 IRC's for FREE mail-order catalogue.' After finding out what 'IRC's' were at the post office ('international reply coupons' which could be redeemed for stamps in any country), I sent off for my first Unicorn catalogue and frequented **Bleecker Bob's** record bins more often than I would care to admit. When I finally received the first catalogue, I was really surprised at the number of ska releases available - I had hit ska pay-dirt! Between mail-ordering directly from Unicorn (where I had to send British pounds and took quite a beating from the exchange rate) - and boy did I ever mail-order - and picking up whatever I could in the ska sections at the local record shops, over several years, I hoarded a respectable number of ska records. Many of my purchases were based on the series of "Skankin' Around the World" compilations (there were five in all). Just about all of these comps were good and I would order a band's record (if available) based on their showing on one of these samplers. Additionally, an enterprising skinhead named **George Marshall** in Scotland that was covering this vital European ska scene - and reviewing many of Unicorn's releases (George was to move on to publish the excellent "Skinhead Times," as well as many books on ska and the skinhead scene).

Here is a small but solid sampling of some of the best Unicorn releases from my collection, as well as a few review notes about each release:

**The Deltones - "Nana Choc Choc in Paris" 1989**  
The Deltones were probably deserving of the attention they received solely on the basis that they were just about the only girl ska group in a scene filled with rude boys. Having said that, The Deltones were very talented song-writers (writing lots of semi-melancholy ska tunes about boys, girls and relationships) -- and not bad musicians to boot. Their sound was more Jamaica via the girl groups of Motown than 2-Tone-y. **Bodysnatchers** descendants - and their re-invention of the genre made all the difference.

**V/A - "Skankin' Round the World, Volume Three" 1989**  
Featured **The Busters** (Germany), **Les Frelons** (France), **The Frits** (Germany), **The Deltones** (UK), **Mr. Review** (Holland), **No Sports** (Germany), **Laurel Aitken** (UK), **Casino Royale** (Italy), **M.S.Q.** (UK), **The Elevators** (UK), **Shot Black & White** (US) and **The Potato 5** (UK). Volume 3 of "Skankin" rivals the first and blows the second clear out of the water. Just about all of the bands are headliners and the tunes from **The Busters**, **The Frits**, **Deltones**, **Mr. Review**, **No Sports** and **Potato 5** are simply brilliant. Very recommended.

**The Toasters - "Naked City" 1989**  
Essentially, this is a collection of the Toasters' mid-eighties songs from their first EP up to the "Thrill Me Up" recording sessions. The majority of these songs originally appeared on the Unicorn "Pool Shark" LP ("Pool Shark" through "So Long Buck") and the first four are from the "Recriminations" EP, which Unicorn also released on vinyl. Several songs - "Renee," "Ideal Man" and "Naked City" - were unavailable in the US at the time (but have since been re-issued on Moon).

**No Sports - "King Ska" 1989**  
Third wave' ska at its best. Seriously. No Sports were what The Specials should have become, were they this talented and German. Revved up ska (but not ska-core or punk!), sometimes snotty, always funny, incredible song writing (no covers!), great performances - and not a bum track on this entire LP. Essential. (This LP was later re-issued on CD with the "Stay Rude - Stay Rebel" EP cuts.)

**V/A "It's A Skandal!" 1989**  
This comp featured **Spy Club**, **No Sports**, **Skaos**,



**Laurel Aitken and The Pressure Tenants - "Blazing New LP!"**  
I Love You, Yes I Do, Lookin' In The Mirror, Night Train to Tokyo, Don't Turn Your Back, Rock With You Tonight, Ringo The Gringo, Peggy Sue, Going Back To The Frontline, Rude Boy Dream, Hitchhike  
**RINGO THE GRINGO**

**The Busters - "Ruder Than Rude" 1989**  
This CD stayed in my player for months and is in the top 10 of 'third wave' ska releases. The Busters - all 13 of them - were all dressed up and ready to skank. Boy, did they ever deliver. Their brand of ska is best described as the Skatalites on speed AND Prozac -- and their sound is phat (one of the best horn sections in ska, bar none). All killer and no filler. Highly recommended. Get it...like now!

**Donkey Show - "Ball Island" EP 1989**  
Straight-up original tunes and a full-realized sound -- very impressive. At the time, I had no idea that this band existed, but I was sure glad I picked up this release. A hint of what American ska had yet to offer.

**Laurel Aitken - "Ringo The Gringo" 1990**  
Unicorn's association with ska great **Laurel Aitken** was a gift to ska music. In the mid-eighties,

Laurel became the guest singer for **The Potato 5** and he cut two great records with them ("The Potato 5 Meet **Floyd Lloyd**" on **Gaz's Rockin'** Records in 1987 and "True Fact" on **Rackit** in 1988). But neither of those records was pure, undiluted **Laurel Aitken!** Unicorn released two stunning retrospectives of **Laurel's** music in 1990: "Rise and Fall/It's Too Late - The

Legendary Godfather of Ska, Volumes 1 & 2" (which featured 24 tracks from 1960-1985, mostly from his many singles) and "Laurel Aitken with **The Skatalites**" (tunes from a 1963 Jamaican recording session with **The Skatalites** as session band). Plus, Unicorn released "Ringo The Gringo," an album of mostly new tunes (it seemed that everyone covered "Sally Brown" during the late eighties), recorded with the **Pressure Tenants** backing. All of the songs on this CD are great (though the odd, cheesy synthesizer does pop up once in awhile) and **Laurel's** voice is in fantastic shape. His love songs go down real smooth. "Ringo The Gringo" finds **Laurel Aitken** (who was in his 60's when this was recorded) at the top of the ska crop and more than deserving of the "Godfather of Ska" title.

Towards the end of 1991, things began to fall apart. Many of the top European ska bands called it quits (especially **The Deltones**, **The Potato 5** and **The Loafers**). The Unicorn releases became a bit spottier (here, I offer my "At Last!" LP from Italian ska band **Strange Fruit** and **Skaboom's** "Lost in Ska" CD as proof) and the ska scene - at least in the UK - appeared to be on the way out. A year earlier, I had begun working for **Moon**, as the sole employee apart from **Bucket**. (Even today, when I shout "Get me a cup of tea, monkey boy!", **Steve** gets a little nervous look in his eyes and starts to get up then remembers when and where he is.... - Ed.) One day, he told me that Unicorn had closed shop and its owner had fled the UK (we later learned for Turkey) for tax evasion. I had a few credit slips that would now remain unredeemed, but I later learned from **Buck** that **The Toasters** never received any royalties on any of their Unicorn releases (and I have heard that several other bands with releases on Unicorn were never paid their due).

Many of the Unicorn titles are an essential component of ska history (and should be in every serious ska fan's collection), but the label's unclear business practices temper my enthusiasm. Fortunately, several of these releases have since been re-issued on more reputable labels (**No Sports** on **Pork Pie**, **The Busters** on **Weserlabel** and all of the "Skankin' Round the World" comps on **Dojo**), so if you can find these titles, you can pick them up relatively guilt-free. All of the titles mentioned above are more bits of evidence in the somewhat secret and usually strange history of ska music - proof positive that ska has been continually evolving since its creation in the 60's to the present day.