

SKANKS

For The Memories

After a long dry spell at the top of the charts, ska is back—well, sort of. For the genre's hardcore fans, it never left—and as J.R. Griffin discovers, the mega-huge **Still Standing** compilation may be the best evidence yet of ska's good health.

CHUCK WREN is on a mission—and he's doing it all in the name of ska. "Hopefully, this is the beginning of something," says Wren, a Chicago-based ska-scene cheerleader and radio DJ whose 10-year-old Jump Up! label has released some 50 ska, soul, rockabilly and punk discs to date. "This has to be our rallying cry."

"This" is *Still Standing*, a monster joint venture between Wren's label and Megalith Records, the label run by Toasters frontman Rob "Bucket" Hingley. Besides being the most ambitious set of its kind ever released, the 88-band, four-CD comp of old- and new-school ska bands makes an important point, according to Wren: No matter what you've heard, no matter where you thought the scene went at the end of the '90s, ska is alive and well in North America.



12 Cent

A VERY QUICK HISTORY LESSON,

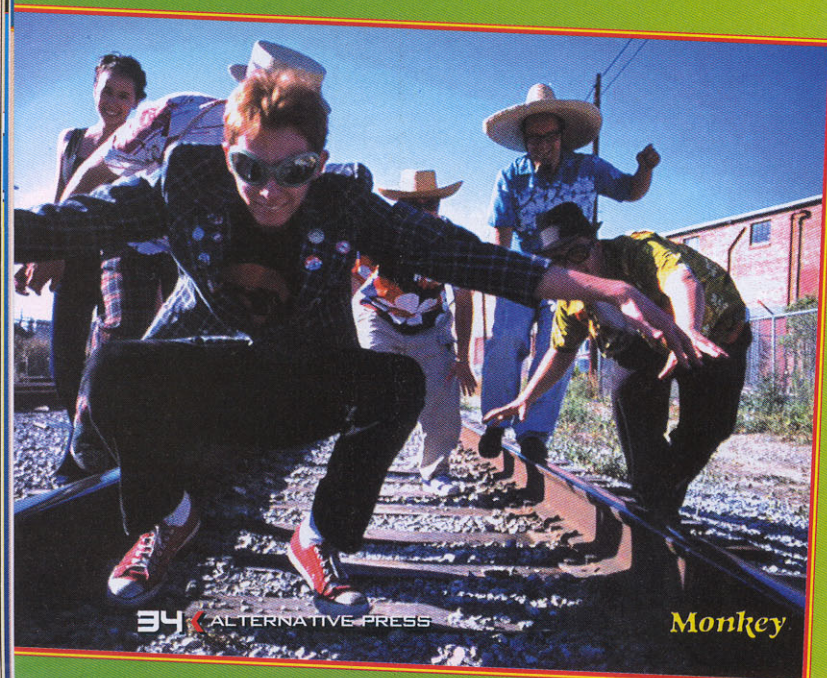
in case you missed it last time around: Created in early-'60s Jamaica as a fusion of the country's mento rhythms with American R&B, ska had filtered through England in the '70s and, by the '80s, formed a strong underground scene in the U.S. But by the mid-'90s, major labels, looking to cash in on the popularity of ska-influenced bands like No Doubt and Sublime, were signing anything with a horn section. Bands like the Mighty Mighty Bosstones, Reel Big Fish, Dance Hall Crashers, Buck-O-Nine and

Save Ferris were flying onto radio playlists, while newcomers were name-checking ska legends like the Specials, the English Beat, Madness and the Toasters for credibility's sake.

Wren says he pretty much knew when the scene was headed for the toilet. "It was when you didn't even have to explain what ska was anymore," he says. "That was a freaky time. When it got to the point that 65-year-old retired parents knew what it was, it was only going to fall."

The scene didn't just fall; it was crushed—at least on the mainstream level. Traditional fans had already abandoned ska to avoid the bandwagon-jumpers, and the bandwagon-jumpers had already hopped onto the next trend. The historic, Bucket-run Moon Ska label had to shut down due to financial trouble. The ska-influenced newcomers either switched their sound or found themselves dropped from major labels back into the indie leagues. Record stores tore out their ska sections, and ska shows dried up. "It was a wasteland," says Wren. "If you brought it up, people laughed at you."

"Every kid in marching band started a band, and all of the sudden, you had tons of horrible groups with no history," says Asian Man Records' Mike Park, who in 1998 created the nationwide Ska Against Racism tour. "That rush of popularity over-saturated the market and created the perception of ska as this wacky, fun thing. When I listened to ska growing up, there were political overtones—and that wasn't the perception that came out of the popularity."





The Toast

>>> BUT TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDS—

even ones created by trends—and if you look at the signs, the ska scene has quietly been rebuilding itself. Most of the ska and ska-influenced bands are still working at it, playing to smaller but still dedicated crowds worldwide. While dissed by traditionalists, the recent Ska Summit 2003 in Las Vegas drew thousands of ska fans out of the woodwork. And, for the first time since the '90s explosion, Park says he's seeing a renewed interest in Asian Man's ska back catalog.

"In a sense, we view ourselves as the ska janitors, cleaning up the house we love after the wild party has moved on," says Bucket. "What we wanted to do with this comp is make a statement about the genre in terms of its durability and fanbase. I'd say that 88 bands on four CDs speaks more eloquently than I on the state of the ska union in 2003."

So, is ska trendy again? Not quite. But that's okay. Ask just about any ska fan, and they'll tell you it was better before the explosion, anyway.

"It's better to have the genre back in the hands of people who love it," says Bucket. "No matter how much you chop down the tree, you can never kill the root, and that's exactly what ska has—a rich tradition of roots and culture stretching back 50 years. No one will ever be able to touch that." *alt*



The Stingers ATX

BUCKET'S Big Eleven

We asked Bucket to prove how vibrant the ska scene is by picking 10 of his favorite new bands from the Still Standing comp. He showed us—by picking 11 of 'em.

THE AFTERBEAT

"From Winnipeg, Canada, my favorite of the astonishingly large Canadian contingent represented on the comp."

AFTERHOURS

"I'm cheating here a little, since this amazing rocksteady combo out of L.A. features Alex Desert and Greg Lee from Hepcat. They've got a great, smooth sound!"



The Afterbeat

THE KNOW HOW

"This hard-working band out of south Florida have been burning up the road and have a solid set on the ska-punk tip. And they already have two albums out."

MIKE MOWRY

"My top track from the whole comp is Mike's 'Smalltown Ska.' Mike's work as a ska troubadour and one-man band is reminiscent of Venice Shoreline Chris' work."

THE PLAYERS

"A rocking big band out of Baltimore and DC, the Players can hit all the styles and are a must-see live."

ROCKSTEADY @ 8

"The sleeper! This standout combo is fronted by Jason Nwagbaraocha from Florida's own Strangeways. Their debut CD release is a knockout!"

THE RUDY CREW

"An outstanding NYC outfit featuring veterans El Husey and Danny Doolin (Skinnerbox/Stubborn Allstars), with great reggae infusions and the explosive chatting of Roy Radics."

SECRET AGENT 8

"Straight outta Texas, this outfit comes right at ya with a massive horn sound and a heavy 2-Tone influence. That will get me every time. You'll like it, too."

THE STINGERS ATX

"Also out of the Lone Star State, these guys come with a refined rocksteady sound very reminiscent of The Slackers."

2 1/2 WHITE GUYS

"On their self-titled release, they displayed an eclectic set of styles, ranging from ska to reggae and back. Getting rave reviews for their live sets, this Utah crew is another band of hard workers."

WESTBOUND TRAIN

"Last, but definitely not least, these guys have to be seen to be believed. Awesome rocksteady, dancehall, soul and more—this crew takes the biscuit!" —J.R. Griffin