

# David Rodigan

## the Gentleman Rude Bwoy

by Nazma Muller

It's a dreary Sunday night in London, the air chilly even for mid-July. But on the radio, "The sun is shining, the weather is sweet/makes you want to move your dancing feet..." Sandwiched between Beethoven on a classical music station and Britney Spears on the innumerable pop ones, Bob is singing sweet songs of melodies pure and true on Kiss100.

It's 10 p.m. and for the next two hours, Jamaicans across London will be 'back a yard', imagining themselves at a session in Rae Town, a warm, aromatic breeze blowing, a Red Stripe or Guinness in hand, all de man dem heads bobbing along to an old-time something from Dennis Brown. "Roddy, yuh a dub-wise smaddy!"

It's a hail-up to the radio DJ, a slice of a "dubplate" slipped in smoothly at the end of a Sanchez number. Only the wickedest of selectors have dubplates and you have to be respected by reggae artistes for them to do a remix of their songs bigging you up. Roddy is David Rodigan, and he has a dubplate mix that includes Luciano, Buju Banton, John Holt and Wyclef Jean.

Roddy is definitely "smaddy" in the dancehall. He is also white, middle-class and British. Short and balding, he is the most unlikely-looking selector. But don't be taken in by his looks or the English accent (Oxford, no less). Rival sound systems have made the mistake, and barely survived the sound clash to tell the tale of the Gentleman Rude Bwoy who slaughtered them with big tunes.



# David Rodigan

Listen carefully and you will hear the tiniest of lilt, a relaxed mellowness to his vowels. It's from 40 years of listening to reggae, 20 of them as a selector, 15 married to a Jamaican.

Rodigan's street cred as a selector is impeccable: every Wednesday night he pulls a crowd of hardcore, homesick yardies at Subterania, a reggae club in Ladbroke Grove. They are not allowed to smoke weed when he's onstage. If he smells it, he stops the show- and no bottles are pelted.

To 21-year-old Bill Cosby, an aspiring selector with the infamous Stone Love sound system, "Rodigan is a maestro. Him in a class by himself. He can put a tune together, he can handle him business. He's a veteran, like Bob Marley."

That this young Jamaican selector considers Rodigan a guru whose style and knowledge must be respected seems merely

"It's irresistible. It's impossible to hear it and not want to dance. And that was what appealed to us most of all. Although we didn't understand patois, we understood the sense and feeling of the pieces. That was the attraction."

But there was, unfortunately, life beyond the record player. After his first year at university, Rodigan dropped economics and switched to drama and the history of theatre later taking a job as an actor in a repertory company in north England. Way into the seventies, he worked as a jobbing actor, moving from company to company.

But he was still hooked on Jamaican music. His friends had outgrown their ska phase and moved on to glam rock and Abba; while Rodigan was still collecting 45s of rock steady, rockers, roots and culture and reggae.

## *He may not be Jamaican born, but*

an inevitable continuation to an amazing journey that began in the late 1960s.

Born in 1951 in a military hospital in Germany to Scots-Irish parents, Rodigan was raised in North Africa until he was eight, when he came to England. Like any teenager, he was into rebel music which in 1960s England included reggae.

"We were young mods," Rodigan recalls. It's a Wednesday night and we're sitting outside Subterania in his Mercedes-Benz. "We were crazy about Stacks, Otis Redding and Marvin Gaye, James Brown, Curtis Mayfield and equally crazy about this new, young music from Jamaica which was underground. You know, you couldn't go to a club and not hear it."

He contracted ska fever. The music was raging through the underground scene; but it hadn't hit, and wouldn't until Millie Small's "My Boy Lollipop" in 1967-68.

"It was great dance music! And it still is." Left to Rodigan ska would still be on Top of the Pops every week. "Ska has this tremendous energy and passion in it," he says earnestly.

A hobby had mutated into an obsession. "Without fail, wherever I was, whichever theatre I was working for, whichever part of the country, I would either get back to London on Saturday night after the show or I'd have friends send me a mail order list and I'd keep up to speed with all the records."

Finally, Rodigan had to face the music. "It was when I was unemployed that I first started to come to terms with my addiction," he said half-seriously. "I realized I as a reggae junkie. I couldn't let this thing go, it was part of my life."

He began to hitchhike from London to Oxford with a bag of reggae records. There was a sizeable Jamaican community in Oxford with its own sound systems. The fellas from the systems would meet him at the bus garage in Oxford every week and Rodigan would tell them what was hot, what to buy. If they didn't like it, he promised, he'd exchange it the following week. "Eventually I went big time," Rodigan laughed, "I got a market stall."

Meeting Bob Marley didn't help his addiction. In 1974, he and his girlfriend went to see Bob at his very first show in

# David Rodigan

London. The first song the Wailers did was “Rastaman Chant”, a non-stop flight to Nirvana for the massive crowd. At the end of the show Rodigan knew there was no way he was going to get past the hundreds of fans waiting outside the stage door. He and his girlfriend left. “I came out and walked down Fulham Place Road where I saw this enormous cloud of smoke come out of a shop doorway. When the smoke cleared, there was Bob Marley on the end of a big spliff.” Rodigan stood frozen, his mouth dropped open and he squeaked, “That’s Bob Marley!” He was stupefied. He didn’t know what to do or say. His girlfriend stared at him. “What do you mean?” she said. “Go and say hello. I’ve heard you go on for years about this man.”

So Rodigan walked up to Bob and said, “You don’t know me but I know you” – or something equally inane. “I just want to say thank you,” he continued, mouth dry, heart palpitat-

few they had a right to.

But when the BBC producers played the tape of his audition to Jamaicans in the industry, they told the producers to hire him; he knew what he was talking about. They thought he was black. Rodigan ended up co-hosting the show with a Jamaican, Tony Williams.

A year later, he went over to Capital Radio in a permanent slot, presenting Roots Rockers, which ran for 11 years. It was shortly after joining Capital that he made his first public appearance.

A big show was being held at the Apollo Club in Willesden, on the oldest black clubs in London. The show had been billed to the max, and he walked onstage to face a room packed to the rafters. From cheers, screams and hollers, re-

## *David Rodigan’s acquired everything*

ing. “I’ve waited so long for this night. I as in that ram jam session and it was just absolutely brilliant and thank you for everything.” Bob replied, “One love. Rasta!” and shook Rodigan’s hand. Shortly after, a car roared up and Bob got in but as it drove off, he turned round and waved at the dazed David Rodigan. The stunned teen just stood there, waiving back.

Four years later, the path to meeting Bob a second time opened up. The presenter of Reggae Rockers, a BBC radio show, left. Rodigan’s girlfriend pretended to be him and wrote a letter to the producers saying he was the best thing in reggae fandom, and they should invite him to audition for the slot. Fifteen minutes into the audition however, the interviewer stopped Rodigan and said, “I’m terribly sorry to have to stop this interview, but I’m afraid we can’t offer you the job because you’re the wrong colour.”

Rodigan didn’t get upset; he knew where the guy was coming from. “I understood perfectly because there was I, a white person, wanting to present a black music programme.” It was hard enough for black people to get jobs in the media then, Rodigan didn’t want to take on the

calls Rodigan, “a deathly silence descended upon the masses.” Mouths dropped. No! A white man! The crowd stared in disbelief: this could not be David Rodigan, the voice they listened to every week, a regular as church. The MC whispered to him, “If you don’t say something, this place is going to explode!”

As Rodigan started to speak, he could see people closing their eyes, trying to match this white man’s voice with what they knew from the radio. They opened their eyes, still disbelieving until he played his signature tune, “Mash Down Rome” by Michael Prophet, and that was it. Bedlam broke out. The place went wild, and Rodigan knew he had them. The music was in control and it didn’t matter the colour of the person playing it.

Around this time, Rodigan made his first pilgrimage to Kingston. “I had landed. The next think I knew I was in Orange Street. I was standing outside Price Buster’s record shop. I was in Waterhouse, 18 Drumbley Avenue. King Tubby’s studio. I met the King. I was in the King’s throne room. The legendary Osbourne Roddock, creator of dub music. Prince Jammy was there. I met Sugar Minott, Jah

# David Rodigan

Yuth, Bunny Wailer, Gregory Isaacs, it was just endless. It was like, Wow! I was meeting all my musical heroes.”

Back in London, he met Bob Marley again. He had gone to Island Records’ office where Marley was rumoured to be hanging out, having just returned from Zimbabwe’s independence celebrations. Rodigan spotted him coming down the stairs, surrounded by his ubiquitous entourage. The two were introduced by an Island official. But instead of shaking Marley’s hand, muttering a platitude and then begging Marley’s manager for an interview, as was the custom, Rodigan said to the superstar, “Will you come on my show on Saturday night?” There was a collective gasp at his audacity. Minders looked uncomfortable and mumbled that he wasn’t doing interviews. Bob Marley looked at Rodigan, looked around at a couple of his people and then back at him and said, “Alright.”

tion. So it was natural for me to inject a level of competitiveness into everything. Here was this DJ who was so big in the UK – I felt I had to see what he had. He was so wrapped up in the music, why not expose him to the very discriminating Jamaican audience?” Rodigan went into shock; but managed to stay clam. “I knew what it involved: you had to play a tune just as good as or better than the tune that’s just been played. It was a bit like a jigsaw, you had to find a way out of that, and to carry on building the jigsaw.” The next day, Rodigan and Barry G were the talk of Jamaica.

Sir Rodigan, as he has been dubbed, is an unworldly yet clever selector. And the key to his cleverness is in his knowledge of the music. As legendary producer Coxsone Dodd, now 70, and one of Rodigan’s own heroes, said, “He was one of the persons who caused a lot of Jamaican DJs to start collecting the music. In sound clashes he was more

*else to make his ascension to reggae royalty bona fide.*

Sure enough, the following Saturday night, Marley showed up at Capital Radio’s studios. Rodigan took him into a small room before the show and said, “Bob, I don’t want to talk about politics, religion or anything like that. I just want to talk about the music. Is that okay?” Marley grinned and said, “Yes!” So they talked about music, and the tunes Marley made and why he made them. “I was nervous as a kid,” says Rodigan. “My voice was like (he squeaks in a falsetto), ‘Bob Marley, oh my God!’ I was shaking like a leaf. I could hardly cue up the records. It was 1980 and I was interviewing Bob Marley. It doesn’t get much better than that.”

In 1983 Rodigan returned to Jamaica to do a series of broadcasts for Capital. There he met Barry Gordon, a popular Jamaican radio DJ who invited him to be on his local show. When the two sat down in the studio Barry G turned to Rodigan and said, “Forget being my guest. This is a clash!” As Gordon explains: “We Jamaicans love competi-

knowledgeable, because of that everybody try to compete with him. And when it come to selection, he’s very good. I’m very respectful of him, because he plays music, he doesn’t go into politics.”

Barry G is still amazed by Rodigan’s devotion to the history of reggae and his willingness to learn the history and origin of a song. “He makes it his duty to experience it; he has mastered it. He can be selecting Jamaican music for Germans and he can tell them where bauxite is mined, where Bob Marley grew up, the history of Port Royal, where to get fish and bammy. This is a man who has no connection with a place other than through the music and he has taken the time to learn the culture.”

And this is saying something. As well known as reggae is, Jamaica, its people and its culture still elude and bemuse the most earnest of wannabes. David Rodigan is no wannabe. As far as Jamaicans are concerned, he’s not only on the inside, he’s ranking. Come down, selector!