

David Rodigan

Ram Jam

a Gwaan

by Kirstie Green

As the Big Chill dusts London with snow, David 'Ram Jam' Rodigan is preparing to fly out to Miami for a series of Thanksgivings shows in the States. Kirstie Green asks "Any room in the record box, David?"

Over the past 15 years, David Rodigan has become the voice of Reggae broadcasting on UK radio. From 1979-1990, he hosted the longest running Reggae radio broadcast in the world - the "Roots Rocker's" show on London's Capital Radio. Currently at Kiss 100 FM in London, he presents a Monday night Reggae show, as well as a broad-based weekday drivetime show. He continues to record (now nine years) a Reggae show for British Forces Broadcasting Services (BFBS).

For thirteen years, Rodigan has also hosted the Saturday "Reggae Night" at Gossip's nightclub, the only Reggae club night in central London. He comperes numerous shows and playouts at dances world wide, working with the best UK and international Sound Systems. For the previous three years, he has played huge Independence dances with Bodyguard in Jamaica.

Many are surprised to learn that David is white. He grew up in a Black ghetto area of London or Manchester, right? Wrong. He was born and raised in a peaceful English village outside Oxford.

So how did a white boy like David get into Reggae?

"I lived in a village in Oxfordshire, and in Oxford itself there was a small Jamaican community. We would meet them through football matches, and just hang out in town. And at fourteen or fifteen, when you were sneaking out to go to clubs, the music that was being played was Rock Steady, Ska, in '67. I was a young Mod and that's the



David Rodigan

music we bought; that's the music we loved. We rode around on scooters, and we'd go to all-night Ska dances."

In the summer of '67 when "Oh Carolina" (the original lick), Prince Buster's "Ten Commandment," and "Dancing Mood" by Delroy Wilson were mashing up clubs and dances, it was nothing out of the ordinary for a white boy to collect Ska and Rock Steady records. Rodigan even earned his nickname from a Jackie Mittoo tune of '67 - "Ram Jam," which he played to death.

How did 'Ram Jam' Rodigan become a DJ?

"I used to play the records at home...so when it came to school discos and parties, they'd say, 'can you bring your records along?' And I'd play for an hour and somebody else would play for an hour, and that's how my DJ-ing started."

He went on to train as an actor at Speech and Drama college and has appeared in several British TV productions. But in 1977 he got the big break as a broadcaster when he was picked to present Radio London's Reggae Show. He was subsequently 'poached' from Radio London in 1997 by Capital Radio, then the only independent music station in London. And so began the "Roots Rockers" Reggae Show, which was to make history, in its 11 years, as the longest running Reggae Radio broadcast in the world.

How did the infamous radio 'clashes' with Barry G come about?

"In 1983 I was doing a programme in Jamaica for London's Capital Radio and Barry G had his own show there [in Jamaica]; so I invited him on to be my guest and he responded accordingly. So we started these clashes." Broadcast simultaneously in London and JA, "they became phenomenally popular in Jamaica because there had been sound system clashes from the beginning of time in Jamaican music, but not on air; so it was great fun."

Then in 1989, Barry G moved to another station, and the clashes died out. How does Rodigan feel about that?

"He and I had a great on-air relationship and a passion for our music, and we knew how to work together. That was very special for me; I thoroughly enjoyed working with him. There were some great moments over the years, and it's unfortunate that it hasn't continued, but I think it reached a point of coming to its own natural conclusion."

And how did UK Sunsplash happen?

"In '84 when I was working at Capital, we went over to Jamaica and had meeting with Synergy. We had actually gone

there to bring our own equivalent of Sunsplash to London, but we started talking to them about the concept and Capital Radio struck a deal and we brought Sunsplash to London. That was '84 and '85; in '86 the police refused a licence and we had to put it indoors; and '87 we brought it to Clapham Common; and since then, its been impossible to get a licence."

Why is it so difficult to hold major Reggae events in the UK?

"The police will not give a licence because of all sorts of problems that they seem to have with it. It's okay for thousands of people to go to a football match and behave badly, but Reggae always creates a problem to the authorities in this country."

David says he has now given up hope, but sees Wembley Stadium as the only possible venue for another attempt at a UK Sunsplash.

When KISS 100 FM got their licence in 1990, there were cries of 'sell-out' when Rodigan joined them as a daytime presenter, as well as Reggae specialist.

Why did Rodigan move towards commercialism?

"I am very happy here at KISS because my background is not just Reggae. Reggae is my first love but in the Sixties when I first started collecting records it was a Jamaican Ska/American R&B/Soul base that I loved...and I felt that from a broader musical base, i.e. Kiss FM, Reggae would get more exposure. My argument has always been that Reggae shouldn't be ghettoised."

David Rodigan has been instrumental in the success of Aswad, Maxi Priest, Freddie McGregor, Sugar Minott, and many more. So what are his current tips for the top?

"At the moment, Cocoa Tea has a really hot record that we're going with here at KISS in a big way - 'Good Life.' Marcia Griffiths' 'I Shall Sing' certainly looks very strong and I've just heard today that Radio 1 (UK's national music station) has decided to playlist it; so that looks hopeful. Freddie McGregor's 'Carry Go Bring Come' I felt should have crossed the border, and I think if it had more national radio support, it would have done [so]."

Rodigan is also excited by new singer Luciana, from whom he expects great things. He is pleased that Beres Hammond, whose amazing career has spanned 20 years, is now signed to Electra. And Rodigan says he is also proud of the way that Ragga (Dancehall) has made a real impact on teenage culture.

Does he believe the UK Reggae can compare with the Jamaican?

David Rodigan

“Yes, of course. Aswad is a phenomenal band; Macka B, Neil Fraser, the Mad Professor, Fashion Records have done extremely well. Greensleeves has kept a torch of excellence in the way it releases a product and market it. There is a cottage industry here that has come and gone, and had its good days of the British Reggae industry. [It] is a little quiet at the moment in comparison, because there are so many other musical influences here.”

Over the years David Rodigan has worked with so many great artists - Bob Marley, Burning Spear, Dennis Brown, Freddie McGregor, John Holt, Gregory Isaacs, I-Roy, Bunny Wailer, Yellowman... What was it like to work with these people?

“To actually meet Gregory Issacs and interview him, I was a nervous wreck. I was so nervous about meeting these people. I was a fan and here I was actually meeting Bob Marley... Bob Marley was just such a great person, such a great motivator of people, in the way he wrote and the way he performed... it was the ultimate privilege to be so closely involved with him at that level.”

Who has Rodigan most enjoyed interviewing?

“Prince Buster was one of my all-time favourite interviews. He told stories about the music business that to this day I’ve never forgotten. He painted pictures. His particular interview was monumental. It really was pictures in the mind. It was radio at its best... He has always been one of my great heroes...I have great respect for him.”

And “Bunny Wailer told a fascinating story in an interview which became a three hour special.”

Who are the producers David respects personally?

“Several producers have done a lot for the industry in Jamaica. One of them is Gussie Clark. I first met him when he had a little room: where he just had a dub lathe, a couple of turntables and a Revox tape recorder. That’s all. And on the shelf, a couple of records that he was selling. And from that has built his own recording studio, and rebuilt another one from the ground, a brand new complex on Windsor Avenue... His attention to detail, his great production skills... he is like how Berry Gordy was at Tamala Motown. He’s done so much.

“Coxone Dodd, of course is phenomenal. What he created at Studio One and the sounds that were built there and became records, that is the foundation of the whole thing.”

“I’m also delighted for what King Jammy has achieved...I’ve watched him grow from being an engineer in somebody else’s

studio, to becoming an engineer in the backroom of his bungalow, where the bedroom where he and his wife slept was the voicing room, and the little room at the back was the mixing room. And from that he’s built this studio complex, with a twenty-four track board going in today... an empire that’s been built from that. And all the artists he’s brought through, from Shabba Ranks to the latest sensation, Bounty Killer, from the Jammy’s camp. So he’s done extremely well.”

David plays shows in many parts of the world. Where does he get the best response?

“Jamaica and America. Germany as well, but I suppose it would be Jamaica. The things that have stuck in my mind over the years have been for example in May Pen’s Bamboo Lawn, Clarendon, Jamaica: I did a show there in the summer; it was a clash with Bodyguard and we had 4,000 people. It was an open-air event, and the response when I signed on and played a combination by Mega Banton and Ricky General was something that will never leave me. They have these things called torches now, with the lighter effect, and just to see hundreds of people within a dance of thousands doing that was something. And also in Brooklyn, I did a show once with Barry G, with 2,500 people and there was tremendous response.”

Apart from one unpleasant episode of racist hate mail, has he ever faced problems being white in a black industry?

“I have never been in a situation where I have been booted, where I have been given any kind of bad treatment. I have walked through Western Kingston. I have walked in the toughest parts of town, where other Jamaicans would say they wouldn’t go, and I have never ever felt remotely threatened, intimidated, frightened or concerned, in fact quite the reverse.” And as Rodigan adds, “I may be white, but I didn’t have any say in that.”

And how does he feel about his achievements?

“I remember as a boy running home from school at 12.28 every Friday lunch time, because every week at that time Stuart Henry played a Rock Steady record. Apart from Emperor Rosko, Tommy Vance and Mike Raven, you didn’t hear those records on the radio. Twenty years after those pioneering days, I’m now in a position to play the very records that kids will run home from school to listen to, without apology.”

And his plans for the future?

“I’ll just carry on doing what I’ve been doing for fifteen years, and that’s play music.”