

# THE SKATALITES

More than a band, the Skatalites are an institution, an aggregation of top-notch musicians who didn't merely define the sound of Jamaica, but WERE the sound of Jamaica across the '50s and '60s. Frequently credited as the originators of ska -- the musical mash-up of calypso, Caribbean mento, R&B, and rock & roll that predated both reggae and rocksteady -- the Skatalites' various members came up through the nation's hotel bar scene of the late '50s, banding together as both an original group and the often uncredited backing band for artists/producers such as Prince Buster and Duke Reid. Although the group officially existed in its original incarnation for less than 18 months (1964-1965), its members brought their signature styles to hundreds upon hundreds of the island's releases. Following a handful of reunions in the '70s and early '80s, the Skatalites re-formed for good in 1986 and, over subsequent decades, have included a rotating lineup of both original members and newcomers responsible for late-period highlights like 1994's *Hi-Bop Ska* and 2007's *On the Right Track*. A version of the band continued to tour and record into the 2010s, even as most of its founding members passed on. Known for classic songs like "Guns of Navarone" and "Phoenix City," their influence can be heard in following generations of musicians from the Clash and the Police to Sublime and No Doubt.

The Skatalites officially lined up as guitarist Jerome "Jah Jerry" Hines, bassist Lloyd Brevett, teenage pianist Donat Roy "Jackie" Mittoo, drummer Lloyd Knibbs, trumpeter Johnnie "Dizzie" Moore, Cuban-born tenor saxophonist Tommy McCook, alto saxophonists Lester Sterling and Cuban-born Roland Alphonso, and trombonist Don Drummond. Moore, McCook, Sterling, and Drummond were all alumni of the Alpha Cottage School for Boys, an educational institution for troubled and troublesome boys in Kingston run by the Catholic diocese. Besides the regular lashings of studies, the school was renowned for its music program, and over the years turned hundreds of wayward boys into performers of note. All four ended up playing the hotel circuit, churning out R&B and jazz covers for the tourists.

Previous to the late '50s, this was Jamaica's only real music industry outside the mento scene, and as there were no local record labels, resorts were the only way for musicians to seriously ply their trade. The hotel bands were an ever-shifting conglomerate of players, but over time they would crisscross each other's paths so often that all became familiar with everyone else's style. Knibbs and Drummond, for example, had both once played with Eric Dean's band. When Knibbs departed for the Sheiks, he joined a lineup that included Mittoo and Moore. However, new career opportunities presented themselves when local businessmen Duke Reid and Clement "Coxsone" Dodd both launched record labels and the era of the session band arrived in Jamaica.

Although both McCook and Alphonso had previously cut acetates, this was the first time any of the future Skatalites would appear on vinyl. Between 1959, when Reid released his first vinyl single, and 1962, most of the band's future members worked regularly at Reid's Treasure Isle studio, playing on a number of R&B, boogie, and ballad releases. The Heartbeat label's *Ska After Ska* bundles up an album's worth of this early material, as does the Dutch label Jamaican Gold, on *Shuffle'n'Ska Time*. In 1962, Dodd opened his own Studio One recording studio, and the future Skatalites now quickly gravitated in his direction as well. Joining them was

McCook, who'd missed all the previous action, having left Jamaica in 1954 to join the house band at the Zanzibar Club in Nassau. The studio was inaugurated with the release of the album *Jazz Jamaica* from the Workshop, which featured McCook, Alphonso, Drummond, and guitarist Ernest Ranglin, among others.

The Skatalites came to fruition in June 1964, according to the members' own reckoning, although they have given conflicting stories about just how it happened. Ranglin credits Moore, Knibbs credits himself, but there's no doubt who came up with the name -- that honor goes to McCook. Drafting in vocalists Jackie Opel, Tony DaCosta, Doreen Schaeffer, and calypso star Joseph "Lord Tanamo" Gordon, the group debuted live on June 27, 1964, at the Hi-Hat club in Rae Town. It didn't take long for the Skatalites to grab a residency at the Bournemouth Beach Club in Eastern Kingston, where they performed three nights a week, as well as a Sunday residency at the Orange Bowl on Orange Street.

With the growth of Dodd's Studio One label, the group members soon found themselves with almost more gigs than they could handle, touring the island as the backing band for most of the label's artists, while also performing on-stage themselves. It must have been grueling, the constant driving to and from venues and playing a minimum of two sets a night, but in truth, the Skatalites were having a whale of a time. Besides working for Dodd and Reid, the group also played on a multitude of records for Prince Buster and Duke and Justin Yap. The actual number of recordings they performed on is anyone's guess, an approximation made more difficult by the fact that the musicians normally went uncredited on the singles themselves. To add to the confusion, the Skatalites in the studio could be any of a number of musicians, not just the aforementioned lineup. Guitarist Ranglin, pianist Gladstone Anderson, trombonist Rico Rodriguez, and trumpeter Baba Brooks are just a few of the many musicians who took part in the Skatalites' recording sessions.

With many of the band's recordings understandably released under the vocalist's name, it has been historically difficult to discern what defines a Skatalites record. For example, on Prince Buster's U.K. smash "Al Capone," Buster may have intoned the title across the track, but wasn't it the Skatalites who truly made the song? Even among the group's own repertoire, the records were credited to the composer, not the band. Thus, the seminal "Guns of Navarone" was originally released under Roland Alphonso's name, not the Skatalites'. Modern archivists have attempted to address these injustices with compilations featuring the band, regardless of original accreditation. The West Side label's *Ska Ra Van: Top Sounds from Top Deck*, for example, has issued numerous Skatalites compilations, all taken from their sessions for the Yap brothers, while Heartbeat's *Foundation Ska* bundles up a batch of Studio One cuts. Thankfully, the members' styles are so unique as to be often be recognizable within a few notes. In truth, most ska compilations are awash in the Skatalites' music, credited or not. That bouncy swing tempo, the jazzy brass, and the steady, skanking beat all shout the Skatalites louder than any written credit, as easily heard on the vocal releases as on their own instrumentals.

But the instrumentals were the group's glory. Songs like "Guns of Navarone," "Phoenix City," "Addis Ababa," "Silver Dollar," "Corner Stone," and "Blackberry Brandy," to name just a small handful of their most seminal cuts, not only defined the island's sound, but created a whole new genre of music -- ska. The group members have oftentimes been quoted as saying their invention

of ska was never intentional, but merely the byproduct of their flawed attempts at American R&B. But this self-deprecating explanation neglects the jazz and big-band swing sound that was also crucial to ska in its original form. And anyone good enough to play in those styles would have little problem mastering R&B. What the Skatalites actually did was drag these older styles into the contemporary scene, merge it with modern R&B, and propel it into the mainstream via a faster syncopated island beat. And with it, the group's musical legacy spread around the world and across generations.

At the very end of 1964, the Skatalites were playing at the La Parisienne club in Harbour View for New Year's Eve, a show that went on without Drummond. The trombonist had a history of mental illness and late that night, in a fit of rage, he stabbed his common-law wife and band vocalist, Marguerita, to death. Drummond was arrested and sent to Bellevue Sanitarium; he died there in 1969. The Skatalites continued on for six more months after this tragedy, but the spark was dying with it, and finally, in July 1965, the members called it quits. Several from the group did continue playing together. Alphonso, Moore, Mittoo, and Brevett eventually formed the Soul Brothers, which later become the Soul Vendors. McCook formed the Supersonics, which was virtually Reid's house band at Treasure Isle Studio, and Sterling went off to work with producer "Sir" Clancy Collins. As their session work continued apace, inevitably many of the former members found themselves back working together. Then in 1975, most of the Skatalites reunited to record Brevett's solo album, *African Roots*. McCook, Alphonso, Sterling, Ranglin, Mittoo, and Knibbs all took part in the proceedings. Two years later, the *Hot Lava* album appeared, credited to Tommy McCook & the Skatalites, but in contrast to Brevett's "solo" album, this really was one. Released in 1978, Jackie Mittoo may sound like a solo outing by the pianist, but actually features a clutch of former Skatalites. That same year, Island head Chris Blackwell convinced the members to reconvene again and recorded the *Big Guns* album. However, due to discord between the label man and McCook, the record sat on the shelf until 1984, when it was finally released as *Return of the Big Guns*. The previous year, the group had again reunited under the aegis of producer Bunny Lee for *The Skatalites with Sly & Robbie & Taxi Gang*.

It took a few more years for the members to finally agree they were a band again; in 1986 they made it official and began gigging regularly. In 1989, they toured the world as Bunny Wailer's backing band, and the next year performed the same service for Prince Buster. In 1993, an album of new material, *Ska Voovee*, finally appeared. Now boasting a core lineup of McCook, Brevett, Sterling, and Knibbs, the album was highly acclaimed. Their timing was perfect, as the U.S. was in the grips of ska fever and the band's constant touring abroad had cemented a worldwide following. Over the intervening years, the Skatalites had returned to their jazz roots with a vengeance, but ska fans didn't mind one bit. Alphonso now permanently rejoined the Skatalites for 1994's *Hi-Bop Ska: The 30th Anniversary Recording*, which also featured such illustrious guests as former vocalist Doreen Schaeffer, Prince Buster, and Toots Hibbert, and an all-star gathering of jazz musicians. The album deservedly earned the band its first Grammy nomination. Even McCook's heart attack in 1995 barely slowed the group down. The Skatalites continued their hectic touring schedule without him until the tenor saxophonist rejoined them early the next year. The Skatalites have not stopped touring the world ever since and continue to be available for festivals, casinos, and intimate venue settings. Their uniquely infectious brand of real, authentic Jamaican ska excites audiences of all ages across the globe year after year.

"We hope you will enjoy listening to our music as much as we enjoy performing it for you."