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Ska Legends the Skatalites Bring Down the House

By Nosheen Shakil

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The monumental Jamaican ska group performed for over two hours. At one point, elated fans swarmed the stage. **Emanuele Tacconi**

Legendary Jamaican ska group the Skatalites performed Friday at club Tochka, and despite revolutionary drummer Llody Knibb passing away last month, their performance set the club on fire — just like they've been doing for the past 47 years.

Knibb was one of the band's original members and the father of the buru drumming style, the typical ska beat.

The group has fond memories of their first Russian concert, in St. Petersburg in 2001. "The crowd everywhere is the same — music is universal," says trumpet and sax player Lester Sterling.

The Skatalites formed in 1964 and got a foothold backing vocalists such as Bob Marley, Prince

Buster and Jimmy Cliff. Ska arose from a fusion of boogie-woogie blues, African rhythms, jazz and mento.

The Skatalites' style formed the roots of rocksteady, reggae, rap, ska jazz and dub, and has influenced techno, trip hop, punk and hip hop.

Sterling and vocalist Doreen Shaffer are the only original Skatalites still touring with the band.

"I feel good with this style of music," Sterling says, smiling suavely when asked about the Skatalites being regarded as the forebears of pretty much every contemporary music style.

Curiously enough, the educational cradle of many of the group's core founders was the Alpha Cottage School, run by Catholic nuns. "It was a good school. If you had ambition you could learn a trade," Sterling recalls.

"You could also choose your instrument and tell the band leader: trumpet, sax, drums," Shaffer says. "It's infectious music — "

"Exercise music," interjects manager Ken Stewart, whose mother still works out every morning listening to ska.

When the sound check is over, the group walks into the dressing room, relaxed and in a good mood. Sterling and Shaffer are regarded with much respect by the others: Val Douglas (bass), Andrae Murchison (trombone), Natty Frenchy (guitar), Cameron Greenlee (piano), Azemobo Audu (drums) and Ken Stewart (manager/occasional piano).

"It's a blessing to play with people who created this music," Frenchy says. "Ska is the start of a big thing, the beginning of rastafari. Everything followed from there."

"We do a bit of meditation before a gig," continues Frenchy, originally a freelance reggae guitar player, who recollects how he was contacted by the Skatalites the night before a big concert in Mexico.

"I knew nothing about ska and met them first on stage. I did not know their songs, neither did I master the ska way of playing guitar," Frenchy recalls. "After the very first song, Lester [Sterling] asked me about the next song, I glanced at the papers laying in front of me, but he refused all I suggested."

When they walk on stage, the crowd gives them a warm and recognizing welcome.

The Skatalites are performing for the 10th time in Russia. It is a mixed but music-conscious crowd. They start the gig off with an instrumental, preparing the scene for Shaffer, the "Queen of Ska."

With a "Hello, Moscow," she charmingly announces the first song, "Can't You See," to a frenzied crowd and then segues into "Sugar, Sugar."

On "El Pussycat" Stewart replaces Greenlee on piano, and to the amusement of the crowd, Greenlee performs a couple of funky dances. A slower reggae tune is a welcome change-up

before "James Bond" drives everyone totally mad. Fans swarm the stage, but the Skatalites play on.

They play for well over two hours, perfectly alternating vocal and instrumental parts, despite the missing French horn — Kevin Batchelor did not receive his visa — and the loss of their longtime drummer. They never lose the crowd's attention.

"The energy which the crowd gives us is what makes us continue for about half a century yet," Shaffer says. "Our soul is in what we are doing."

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