

STEEL



Liberation Posse Rides to the Top

BY JAMES WEEKS JR.

It's a wet, windy Saturday evening in the U.S. Virgin Islands. It's also quite late.

Yet nothing seems to crush the enthusiasm of the reggae fans who have waited several hours for the show to begin. One literally feels the excitement — it surges through the night like a raging tropical storm. And why shouldn't it? One of the world's premier reggae bands — Steel Pulse of Birmingham, England — is slated to perform tonight.

Steel Pulse is one of the hottest reggae acts to surface since the untimely death of Bob Marley. This supergroup of talented Rastafarian musicians has thrilled audiences all around the world with their theatrical delivery and distinctive sound that captures body and mind immediately. Like Marley, the lyrics of Steel Pulse are loaded with themes of freedom and equality for millions of Africans and their descendants who still suffer from the after-effects of slavery and colonialism.

A few wild shrieks echo from the audience as the lights dim and the master of ceremonies announces the entrance of the musicians.

David Hinds is the handsome lead vocalist with the shock of dreads that extends vertically into the air like a wooly antenna receiving subtle vibrations from the heavens. Alphonso Martin is the wizard percussionist. The unyielding bassman is Alvin Ewen. Steve "Grizzly" Nesbitt thrashes the drums and Selwyn "Bumbo" Brown commands the keyboards. Ronald Butler and Errol Reid, the two newest members, play lead guitar and keyboards, respectively.

"Welcome to the 1986 Steel Pulse Liberation Tour," croons Hinds into the microphone. "And just as iron sharpeneth iron, so does a man sharpeneth in the company of his friends. So gather around my fellow men and get together my fellow men, because a house that is divided cannot stand. Cut ice, Grizzly, cut ice!"

A riff rises from Grizzly's drums, electric guitars and keyboards chime in as the other musicians receive their cues, a heavily syncopated bassline follows, and before you know it another great reggae concert is under way.

The rhythm captures the collective spirit of the audience. The coolness of the night, the lateness of the show, and the tiny drops of rain that sting their faces occasionally all go by unnoticed. They're completely lost to the world of music, unable and unwilling to leave it.

Hinds strums his guitar and pumps lyrics directly into the willing brains of the audience. He sings about corrupt politicians who use bodyguards to protect themselves from the fury of the exploited masses who demand justice. "I just can't sorry for the bodyguard!

Under your collar is getting hot! Bulletproof vests, strapped to your chest/Who's got a bomb?/Who's got a knife?/Who's got a gun?/Who's gonna lose their lives?" he asks insistently.

Steel Pulse pulls no punches. They speak fearlessly and frankly about the problems and frustrations afflicting humanity. They offer no apologies for their tough stance on issues pertinent to the survival of the black race. They demand answers from a world plagued with racism, insensitivity and corruption of the highest order.

Their story began some 12 years ago in Birmingham, where the original members were born to West Indian parents. The group first consisted of Basil Gabbidon on lead guitar, Bumbo Brown on keyboards, Hinds on guitar and vocals, and Ronnie McQueen on bass. Percussionist Phonso Martin and drummer Grizzly Nesbitt joined the group later.

Inexperience and lack of proper equipment prevented their early performances from being successful. With the exception of Gabbidon and Nesbitt, none of the members had prior musical experience. As a consequence, their initial repertoire consisted of cover tunes by other reggae artists.

Few of the Birmingham nightclubs that catered to the West Indian population would hire them. They were left with no other choice but to perform at punk rock concerts as well as concerts organized by Rock Against Racism, and organization devoted to stopping the racist National Front (the British counterpart of the Ku Klux Klan).

As the band progressed and became more popular among the British listening public, they began touring with groups such as the Police, Eddie and the Hot Rods, and the Stranglers. By 1977-78, Steel Pulse was touring with internationally acclaimed reggae groups like Burning Spear and Bob Marley and the Wailers.

Their first album, *Handsworth Revolution*, was released in 1978. They've released five other albums: *Tribute to the Martyrs* (1979), *Reggae Fever* (1980), *True Democracy* (1982), *Earth Crisis* (1983) and *Babylon the Bandit* (1985).

Steel Pulse is one of the most highly respected reggae bands in the world today. They're constantly on the road. Their travels have taken them to Japan, Nigeria, Sweden, Italy, Finland, Denmark, Norway, the United States and the Caribbean.

When not touring they spend a great deal of time rehearsing and working on ideas for new albums. Rehearsals last as long as six hours a day, six days a week. They are disciplined professionals who work extremely hard to make sure that their audiences get quality concerts. And before every concert they huddle together

PULSE



PHOTO BY EBET ROBERTS

and chant a psalm from the Bible for strength, wisdom and spiritual guidance.

The road to the top has not been easy, however. Setbacks and obstacles have been part of their experience too. While touring Nigeria in 1982, several members contracted malaria, and one of them almost died. As a result, several performances had to be cancelled.

The exclusion from the 1985 Live Aid concerts in the United States and Europe came as an insult to the group as well as other highly acclaimed black bands who would have loved to perform for the benefit of their less-fortunate African brothers and sisters. How ironic when one considers that Rastafarians believe Ethiopia to be their spiritual and ancestral home. "Jive Aid," the brethren of Steel Pulse called it angrily — a sign that racism is still alive and well in the 20th century.

David Hinds has been called the nucleus of Steel Pulse. This brilliant young songwriter/vocalist has made an impact in the reggae world that cannot be denied or suppressed.

He's a fearless warrior who uses music as a vehicle to make people aware of the madness occurring in the world. His lyrics prompt you to take action against the global system of social, political and economical oppression which seeks to destroy people of color.

Born in England on June 15, 1956, to hard-working Jamaican immigrants, he believes that black people should repatriate to Africa on a cultural, physical and mental level.

After the last Steel Pulse tour of the Virgin Islands, I had a chance to rap with this dynamic brother about life, love, music and liberty. The following are excerpts of that interview.

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Q: Do the lyrics of your current hit "Save Black Music" refer to the experience of black musicians in general or do they refer specifically to the Steel Pulse experience?

A: It's an experience of black musicians in general and that includes Steel Pulse. Black music has been established for a long time, but it hasn't been established through the eyes of the Western world. We felt that a statement should have been made about the calamities of the music industry and the politics of racism. A lot of black musicians would never think of making such statements on records. It's something that they have been running away from, thinking that they would be signing their own death warrants if they did. We just went out there and did it to make people aware of what's going on.

Q: In your recent track "Kick That Habit," you sang about "warriors weeping for a nation." What exactly do you mean by that?

A: It's so frustrating. I know it must have been frustrating for people like Marcus Garvey and various other activists who laid down their lives for the black man and mankind in general. When I say warriors are weeping for a nation, I know that these activists have done lifelong research on how to better the black race.

Did they die in vain? Some of these activists have been gone some 20 years and the black man is still the same. As a matter of fact, he's gotten worse. They spent years trying to make the black man love himself and be aware that if your hair looks a certain way, then love it because that's the way God made you. If that's the

color of your skin, then love it. If that's the shape of your nose, then love it. If that's the way your lips look, then love it because God made you that way.

They started these kinds of philosophies 20-25 years ago and throwed it out for the downtrodden masses, and in this day and age we're coming back again with things like "Jerry Curlis," which is a modern version of the "conk" hair that they were fighting against a mere 20 years ago. The black man is still trying to have his hair look different from the way God naturally intended it to look.

These are the kinds of things that I mean when I say "warriors are weeping for a nation." In the communities where youths are supposed to be strong because they are the coming of the nation, there's so much drugs on the rampage. It's like a no-hope territory.

Warriors can't help but weep when they see that. Despite all the talking, despite all the books, all the research and all the meetings, we still have to show the nation the basics all over again. There hasn't been a progression.

Q: What was going through your mind when you wrote the lyrics for "Wild Goose Chase"?

A: It was a tune where the vibe was reaching me at various times over a period of months. As I got new words and ideas together, I put it down in note form until I had a collection of words that could put a sensible song together.

I thought that there was a need for the "Wild Goose Chase" experience because we're living in times where science and technology are taking over the natural habits of man. There's this idea of test-tube babies and cloning. You're gonna find that man is gonna try to clone with animals and vice versa. I'm strongly against that cause dem things deh is anti-God.

You also have the situation of the Third World countries where food is used as a political weapon. The West Indies is one of the healthiest places to live in when it comes to growing your own food. There's a lot of poor people in the West Indies and what has been keeping them going is the fact that they have healthy diets, if nothing else.

Then all of a sudden the Western world comes in with Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut and McDonald's. They discourage him [the West Indian] from cooking food with the natural things that he has in his own backyard. He is turned into a consumer as opposed to a producer.

That's why I say that the food from the

West is a political weapon. It's used to generate the Third World man. It's beneficial for the Western world because it gives them the money to build military weapons.

Q: How do you feel when you have to play before an audience that doesn't understand the philosophy of Steel Pulse and doesn't understand where the band is coming from?

A: That's a very interesting question. What I tend to do, is before I start certain songs, I usually give them a summary of what the song is about and why the song had to be written. I try to incorporate the listener into what I'm talking about and let them know that they can relate to what I'm saying, no matter what walks of life they come from.

We're also living in times where a lot of people like to hear the "rap" where a man talks over the dj. I like to give my keyboard player (Bumbo Brown) a lot of room to do a lot of deejaying, because in the long run a lot of people are listening to more deejaying than vocals or singing melodies.

Q: What are your feelings about the Bible and spirituality in general?

A: Well, the Bible is a book of truth, but at the same time I've always had the belief that it was arranged in such a way to keep people in confusion.

When I read the Bible I interpret it on a spiritual level with things with symbolic meanings. I also interpret it on a historical level knowing that certain areas were inhabited by certain people and certain characters had certain colors.

People interpret the ideas of the Bible the wrong way. That's why there are so many wars in these times. All religions are supposed to resolve to one truth, at the end of the day, and if it's not resolved to one truth then you're not dealing with anything.

Q: What is your advice to younger musicians?

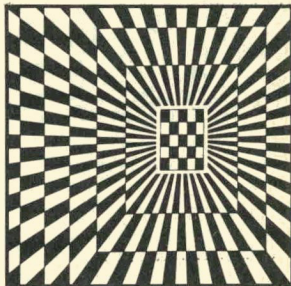
A: My advice to younger musicians is to be original, because with originality you can go a long way. Be committed to your originality and be determined with your originality. There are so many people who will try to discourage you from doing original things because it's different from the norm. The majority of mankind is afraid to stray from things that they are used to.

Q: The way your hair grows has always been a conversation piece among reggae enthusiasts. Your dreadlocks stick straight up in the air at a 90-degree angle. What makes it stay up like that?

A: Heh, heh, that's an interesting question. I told you before that it was black magic. Well, I have very, very coarse hair, you see.



David Hinds: "Rally round, come get strong. Help I sing this freedom song. Save black music now!"



gence to do her work. I'm not somebody who feels that because she's a woman she's not supposed to do certain work. If she's capable of doing what the man can do, I think she should go ahead and do it. But at the same time I'm also a believer that the woman is supposed to know who the man is. One thing I'm not really into is a woman who feels that she's supposed to wear the pants.

Q: Steel Pulse is on the road touring quite a bit. How does it feel being away from one's family for such a long length of time?

A: It's kind of painful. I have a couple of children, and I like to be with them as much as possible to see them grow a certain way. It's so easy for them to be influenced by friends who have parents with negative attitudes that are pro-system. I like to put them (his kids) on the straight and narrow path, and being away so often takes that away from them.

Q: What are the future plans of Steel Pulse?

A: We hope to get involved in a lot more videos, and we would also like to get involved with film scores or movies with very good story lines.

In addition to this, we would like to get some kind of corporation started in the ghetto to help the youth who are going astray fast and furiously. We can't all be musicians, but there are so many things in the music industry that youths can get themselves involved with. They can promote shows, since this is always a problem when it comes to black music, particularly reggae music. The promoters aren't really happening when it comes to reggae music.

There's studio work and live work, music management and music publishing. There's nutrition; bands need to know what kinds of foods will maintain them on lengthy tours. There's so many things that need to be done out there. *

When I started growing dreadlocks seven years ago, I constantly used to wear a hat on my head. After a while my hair started growing in the shape of a hat, and I had to buy new hats to fit my hair as it started to grow. I didn't want to tear my hair down. I decided to let it grow naturally.

Q: What are your feelings toward women in general and their role in society? What do you think are the causes of breakdowns in healthy relationships?

A: A lot of families are breaking up today because of financial reasons. When one is not financially comfortable it causes a breakdown because the wife's going to need certain things to keep the house in order.

Sometimes the man is in no position to provide this or does not choose to provide it because of systematic pressures. The system has put a lot of people, particularly working-class people, in such predicaments where they cannot make amends with their lives. The first thing you want to turn on is the one closest to you and it's usually your wife or your kids.

In the case of the black man, he is usually not informed of what his woman stands for and represents. He fails to remember and realize what black women had to go through during slavery. He's supposed to really treat her better than that.

I respect a woman who has the intelli-

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