

ROOTS RESURREX^{ION}TION

BY CARTER VAN PELT

OMAHA, Nebraska—David Hinds receives a faceful of the Midwest December wind as he steps off the Steel Pulse tour bus at Omaha's Ranch Bowl. His thoughts remain fixed, however, on a man born here almost 70 years ago. Not surprisingly, the presence of one of the world's most successful reggae bands in Omaha is greeted with the same degree of mainstream indifference usually reserved for the city's native son, Malcolm X.

Tonight's concert may be a word-of-mouth affair, but the opportunity is not to be wasted by old-school Steel Pulse fan Terry Goods, who waits backstage for the chance to pry some knowledge from the legendary frontman. "What's up between Malcolm and Martin?" he asks with as much cool as he can keep. "I dig Malcolm one hundred percent," Hinds pontificates. "One hundred percent, you better know that. Malcolm X is my mentor, man."

While the question is legitimized by the performance of "Let Freedom Ring," Hinds' point is driven home by "X Resurrection" from Steel Pulse's latest work, *Vex*. Not only is "X Resurrection" a straightforward endorsement of the militancy of Malcolm, it also has a significant underlying meaning for Hinds and company. "X" marks the band's 10th album. And along with the open apology of "Back to My Roots," it marks the resurrection of a musical and philosophical approach which originally defined Steel Pulse in 1978 on its debut *Handsworth Revolution*—a 37-minute masterpiece of African uplift set to some of the most intricate reggae ever produced.

After being thrown into the unenviable role of successor to Bob Marley's musical legacy by many fans and critics, Steel Pulse struggled for 10 years to find a formula for commercial acceptance. In the process, the band parted company with its studio mentor, producer Karl Pitterson, and thus strayed from the foundations of *Handsworth Revolution* and classic albums, *Tribute to the Martyrs* and *True Democracy*. Varying failed attempts to find the magic crossover formula and years of heartfelt advice from fans the world over have finally caused Steel Pulse to get back to their roots.

Keyboard player Selwyn Brown says the band has simply given up trying to make a larger commercial impact. "We reached a stage with the albums where we tried and tried and tried this crossover thing and basically got tired of it. When it didn't work, when it didn't cross over in a big way, we thought, 'This don't make no sense. So let's just go back to what we're more accustomed to doing,' which is stuff like we're doing now on the *Vex* album. That's why you find tracks like 'Dirty Water,' tracks like 'Back to My Roots,' 'New World Order,' 'Islands Unite,' and all those kind of tracks [which] to me, represent Steel Pulse more."

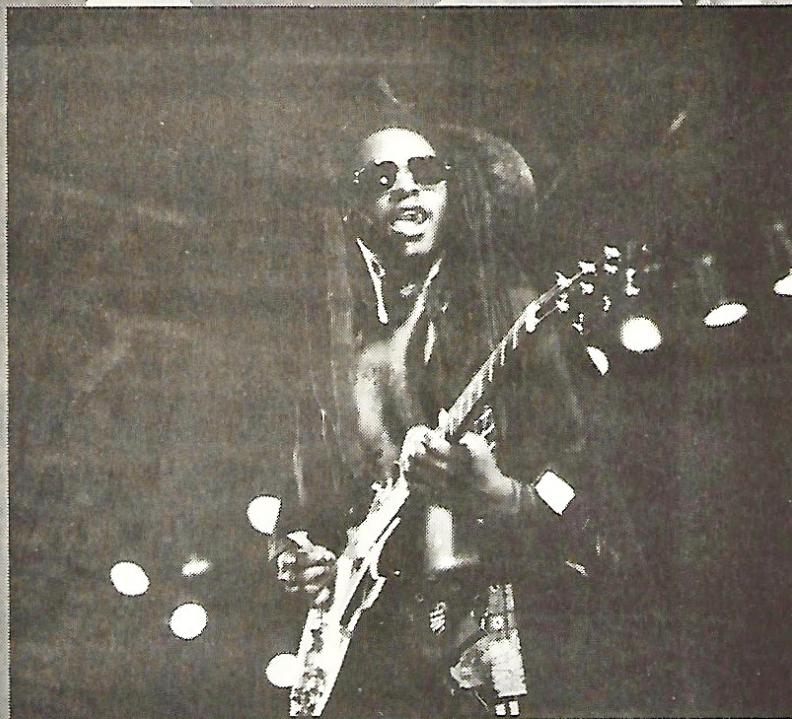


PHOTO BY JOHN KIRI

One of the immediate curiosities of *Vex* is a tune called "Dirty H2O," which tells the tale of Jamaican immigrants in Britain. All of the families of Steel Pulse members left the West Indies for England in the 1950s due to poor economic circumstances. For Hinds' family and most others, the improvement in England was marginal at best. Nonetheless, the Jamaican community in the Handsworth section of Birmingham, home of Steel Pulse, became an oasis for Caribbean culture in England. "Our parents came to a country that needed repairing, needed to be built up, needed to be back to the empire it was supposed to have been in the [early] 1900s. [The government] went to Jamaica, the Caribbean islands for support. In doing so, our parents came over with the latest form of music that was happening in Jamaica at the time. Which, by the time my parents got to the British Isles, was calypso and mento."



PHOTO BY DENNIS KEELEY

Steel Pulse's current incarnation: Selwyn D. Brown, David Hinds and Steve "Grizzly" Nisbett Sr.

The ghetto streets of Handsworth buzzed through the 1960s with the latest hits from Jamaica. By 1966, when Hinds had reached the age of 10, calypso and mento had long since given way to ska and bluebeat. The sound systems blasted records by the Skatalites, Jimmy Cliff, and eventually Toots and the Maytals, Desmond Dekker and the Wailers.

While Hinds recalls the arrival of the slowed-down grooves of the Lee Perry-era Wailers in the late '60s, he says the most inspirational musical tips were being dropped not by Bob Marley, but by the cultural messenger Winston Rodney, AKA Burning Spear. "Burning Spear was like an outlet and a vehicle. He used his philosophy through the reggae music where we learned of Marcus Garvey. It was an era where blacks, especially young blacks in England, wanted something to hold on to as far as a

culture, because it was shown to us time and time again that we weren't a part of the British society. So when Burning Spear came with that, it was like a godsend. I would say Burning Spear was responsible for the birth of Rastafari in England."

The social and political climate in Birmingham was anything but encouraging to young British blacks, and the growing alienation left its mark on the teenage David Hinds.

"There was continued confrontation with police harassment with all the black youths in the community. There was the declining educational system, and there was high unemployment in the black community, so we needed something to keep our spirits up and keep us conscious in what we were doing as black people as a minority in England. So we stuck in on the music."

As the increasingly tense racial climate of Handsworth made its

Continued on page 44.

STEEL PULSE



Continued from page 43

impressions on Hinds, he began to comprehend the larger magnitude of his struggle by reading a newspaper called the *West Indian World*. The publication reported black news from the Caribbean, Africa and America, and paid particular attention to the trials and tribulations of Soledad Brother George Jackson in California. Jackson, who by 1969 had served nine years at Soledad Prison for robbing a gas station of \$70, was accused that year of a prison murder and transferred to San Quentin the following summer. There, he was murdered on Aug. 21, 1971, along with five other prisoners under a bizarre and controversial set of circumstances. "I used to keep up on George Jackson and saw several photographs of him walking in chains—and that really got to me. So that started me thinking on a political level."

The formation of Steel Pulse took place in January 1975 when the enterprising bass player Ronald "Stepper" McQueen, guitarist Basil Gabbidon and David Hinds sought to channel their own energy and frustrations through a musical medium. Selwyn Brown, a school chum of David's from Handsworth Wood Boys' School remembers being recruited: "One New Year's, Ronnie said to me, 'David and Basil are forming a band.' I said, 'A band? But none of us can play.' Ronnie says, 'Well, we really want to form a band. Are you interested in being a keyboard player for the band?' I said, 'Well yeah, but I've forgotten everything.' He said, 'That doesn't matter. All we got to do is get a keyboard and mention it to David and them.' We used to rehearse in Ronnie's bedroom for a while. Then David's dad let us use his basement, and we got more serious about it and just started practicing, practicing, practicing. We basically taught each other how to play, so there was no ego things. We just wanted to play and enjoy music and inspire people and write something conscious." After drummer Steve "Grizzly" Nisbett, percussionist Phonso Martin and singer Michael Riley were recruited, the original lineup was complete.

The first three years before the debut

Handsworth Revolution were spent learning to play and looking for gigs. The young Steel Pulse learned the one drop from covering tracks by Burning Spear, the Gladiators, the Abyssinians and Bob Marley. Hinds claims that gigs were increasingly difficult to negotiate at established black music clubs. "What happened—a funny thing happened, because there was a stigma that went out there with the reggae music. They thought it promoted ganja smoking. They thought it promoted the philosophy of Rastafari which was against the system of Babylon, against police officers, against anything the British administration was trying to throw on the black community. So club owners got scared. 'Hey, look we don't want you doing this kind of music at our clubs because you're gonna be closing our clubs down.' So Steel Pulse had a very difficult path trying to get to play in black clubs. Then there was other groups that was happening at the time that weren't supporting the Rastafarian philosophy, and they played a part in having us alienated from these clubs. 'Wow, Steel Pulse wants to come here next week. They're all about that Rasta stuff, you know, that ganja smoking. If you want your club closed down, go ahead and promote them.'"

Ironically, the bulk of Steel Pulse's early exposure came by way of the revolutionary punk rock scene overturning the British music industry in the late '70s. Steel Pulse was a member of the class of '78 in England, which included such notables as the Buzzcocks, the Police and Elvis Costello. These bands were rebelling not only against British political and social establishments but also against the rock 'n' roll establishment of groups like Led Zeppelin, the Who and the Rolling Stones, who had grown immensely popular, wealthy and decadent during the preceding 10 years.

In the process of gigging with eventual legends such as the Clash, XTC, the Police, Generation X and the Stranglers, Steel Pulse delivered its own hard-core anti-establishment message to mohawked punk rockers, who naturally took the band to heart. "The punks went absolutely apeshit," Hinds proudly recollects. "We [were] saying things that they wanted to hear. We just came differently. We were against the grain. For example, we wore stage clothes representing different walks of life. The bass player ['Stepper'] McQueen came out with a tails outfit and a bowler hat representing the bureaucracy side of England—the gents with the derby hats and the umbrella sort of thing. We had another guy who was another front man [Michael Riley], who dressed like the local vicar. So, it was like, we came to preach. And then you had Phonso [Martin] who dressed up like an 18th century footman—one of those cats who went around escorting kings and queens off of stage wagons. 'What's going on here?' they were saying. So it

was mayhem. It was immediate mayhem.

"When we got signed to Island Records is when we were touring with Burning Spear. They were sort of gobsmacked when they saw us, you see. Burning Spear was cultural, and we just come in and against all odds, and we just went against the grain of how they envisioned a reggae act. We just came on like a bunch of weirdos. It was the punk rockers' duty to have Steel Pulse as an opening act."

Hinds also attributes the "articulate" musicianship of the Police, XTC, and particularly the Stranglers, for inspiring Steel Pulse to be "as accurate as possible." The knack for musical professionalism learned from those bands would separate Steel Pulse from their reggae peers in the coming years.

Hinds claims the only drawback of playing in the punk scene was the punks' unusual method of displaying affection, which was hocking gobs of spit at the artists as they performed. "We had to stop the music quite a few times and tell them we weren't into that kind of thing, and what we're about is reggae. It was a different texture of music and a different subject matter to what the punks was dealing with. After a while they got accustomed to Steel Pulse and they stopped the spitting."

On the strength of their live act and the relative success of three independently released singles, "Kibudu, Mansetta and Abuku," "Nyah" and "Ku Klux Klan," Steel Pulse was signed to Island Records in early 1978. At the time, anyone with a name in reggae was on Island and Steel Pulse released three albums for Chris Blackwell before being dumped in 1980. Most significantly, the Island years matched the band with Jamaican producer Karl Pitterson.

By 1978, Karl Pitterson had already earned himself a name by producing and engineering for Bob Marley (*Exodus* and *Kaya*), Peter Tosh (*Legalize It*) and Bunny Wailer (*Blackheart Man*). Through his work with the three Wailers, Pitterson had traveled to England and become the first Jamaican engineer exposed to what was then the height of 24-track recording technology. The expertise comes through crystal clear on his work with Steel Pulse. The legendary collaboration resulted in three albums, *Handsworth Revolution*, *Tribute to the Martyrs* and *True Democracy*, all of which are still considered among the best reggae albums ever recorded. "What [Steel Pulse] was doing," reflects Pitterson, "it did start a new style of reggae."

"The chemistry of Steel Pulse and Karl Pitterson was legendary in itself as the chemistry of, say, Bob Marley along with Peter Tosh," says a reverent David Hinds. "It was like, I don't think that kind of chemistry could ever be recaptured. It was just one of those things. *Handsworth Revolution* took off, *Tribute to the Martyrs* took off. The third album (*Caught You AKA Reggae*

Fever) didn't happen because we changed producers again. So every time we used Karl, it was dynamite, because the chemistry was right.

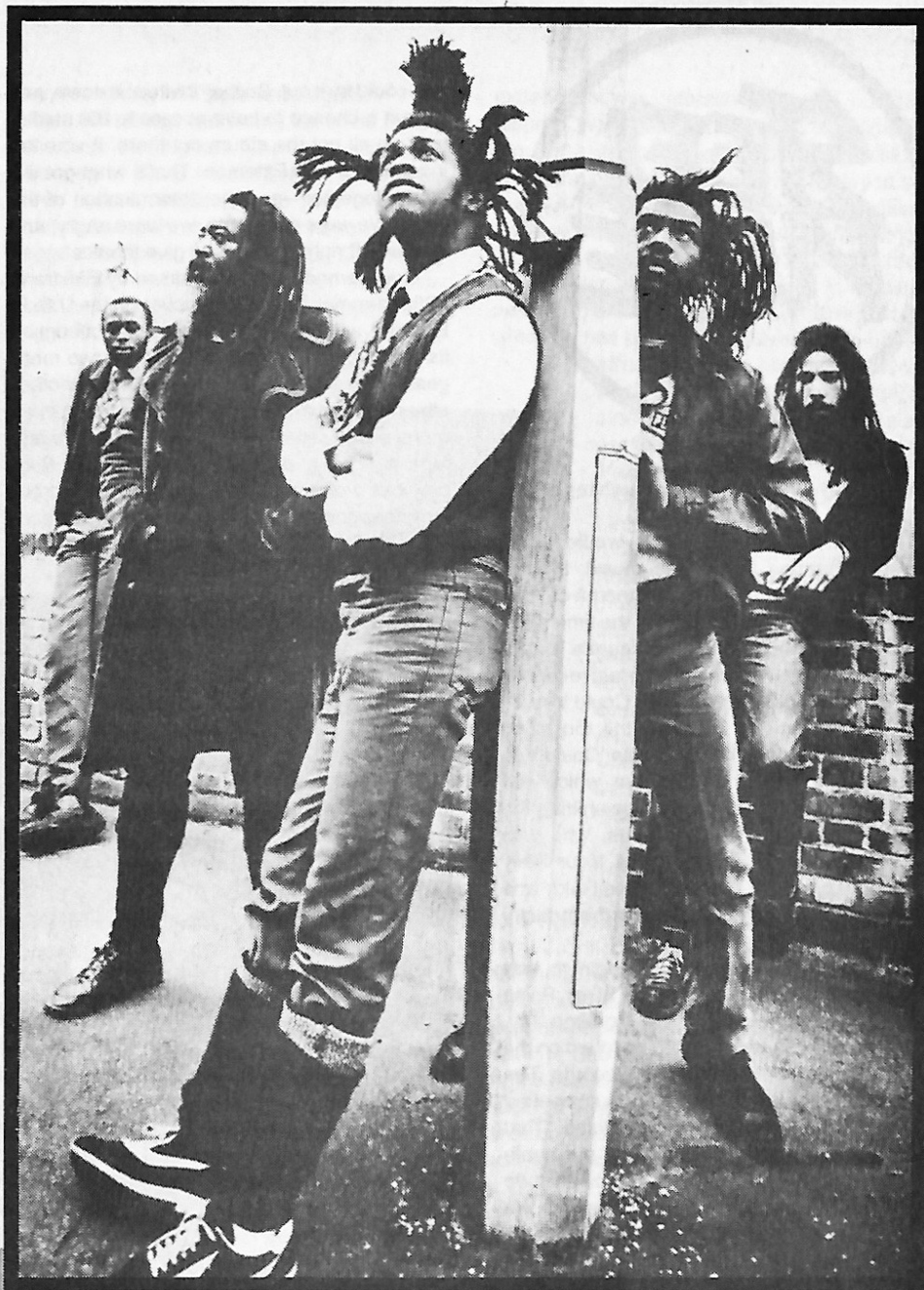
"We had somebody that believed in the band. That's the most important thing when you're working with a producer. You gotta have someone who says 'screw the money' or 'I'm getting X amount, but that doesn't really mean anything to me. I'm really into the sound of these guys. I want to show the rest of the world as well that given the right band, I can make things happen as a producer.' He had all that going for him as well, because when he first met us, we gave him a hard time, because we thought we knew it all. We were young, and we didn't want nobody altering the sound what we had which we knew in our hearts was unique. And we were knocking about in the studio for about 10 days, and he just switched everything off and says, 'All right, look guys, you've screwed me around enough, now let me tell you what I'm all about, and let me tell you what you're about and what I see.' And then he went on to telling us where he's coming from as a person, and he's worked with Bob Marley and the Wailers—Peter Tosh, Bunny Wailer and all of them. And he says this is the band he's been waiting for—just please let him try it, and so we did."

Karl Pitterson sheepishly confirms the scene with a young Steel Pulse. "They were afraid I was going to give them a watered-down version. It wasn't really like a knock down and drag out thing, [but] for the first three or four hours, all you needed was a knife to cut it. I think they were saying, 'we wanna see this person flop.' Then they started listening, and from then on everything went fine."

"The most painful thing about it on reflection," says Hinds, "if we'd have let him have his way from day one, the album *Handsworth Revolution*, there wouldn't have been anything standing near it even till today."

The eventual arrival of punk rock on American shores brought news of the latest English reggae as well—by printed word and word of mouth. The Sept. 9, 1978 issue of *Melody Maker* even featured a youthful Hinds on the cover. That kind of invaluable publicity, in addition to Island Records' widespread distribution, earned Steel Pulse a significant American audience before the band first set foot on American soil in the fall of 1980.

However, Hinds describes the period with tempered bitterness. "Prior to leaving [England], we were told by Island Records, 'Why do you want to go to America? Nobody knows you... you'd be wasting your time.' So we came over literally thinking we just need to get away from England. They were trying to phase us out in England—reggae music. They were bringing in the ska revival. We came to the U.S. almost like paupers. We came here not knowing that any-



The group in 1982: from left, Selwyn Brown, Steve Nesblitt, David Hinds, Phonso Martin, Ronnie McQueen.

body knew Steel Pulse, and we were prepared to rough it. And our first show here was in a place called the Mud Club in Manhattan. We thought, 'Oh yeah, we're gonna be playing at the Mud Club, and there's gonna be a handful of people,' and by the time we did other clubs in the United States, we'd probably get a little buzz. And the place turned out, man, we couldn't believe it."

Thus the conquest of America that has sustained Steel Pulse for 15 years had begun. Notably, this was also the period that Hinds began to grow what would become the world famous "stovepipe dread"—a two-foot high ver-

tical tower of dreadlock. The personalized hair style was underscored by his seemingly separatist statement to *Melody Maker* that "Rasta feels his roots are in Africa, I feel my roots are everywhere."

Upon reflection, Hinds reiterates his words. "I said that because I always thought that for Rasta to be appreciated and to be totally accepted it had to be put out there worldwide. It's something that Bob Marley tried to do, and he came so far. And we thought that we could share our philosophy and our political and social issues with the Western world as well as the third world, i.e.

Continued on page 46



Continued from page 45

when I say Western world, I mean whites as well as blacks."

The beginning of the 1980s would signal massive changes for reggae music. In May 1981, Bob Marley died from melanoma cancer. Marley's direction and attitude at the time of his death left a lasting impact on reggae music. "When Bob Marley passed on, the last record he was noted for while passing was 'Could You Be Loved.' And that was probably the most pop piece of all the songs he did. It was 'Could You Be Loved.' He used the word love, which was more in the genre of music that was hitting the airwaves, and then there was us, who was coming with a lot of militant stances. Your 'Rally Round The Flag,' your 'Blues Dance Raid,' and that kind of thing. And all of a sudden the industry wasn't catering to that."

In August '81, things would begin to turn around for the struggling band. Steel Pulse headlined Reggae Sunsplash in Montego Bay, Jamaica, excerpts of which can be found on the *Sunsplash '81* album on Elektra Records. The performance and subsequent live album opened the door for the first rebirth of Steel Pulse. "That did us a lot of good. That boosted our confidence. Rejected by England to realize that we had been accepted by the rest of the world. We had that 'screw England' concept in our minds, you know. We did Sunsplash and Elektra Records took an interest."

On the momentum of the Sunsplash performance, Steel Pulse, once again under the guidance of Karl Pitterson, would confront a defining moment. *True Democracy*, recorded in an amazingly brief 25 days on (by then) primitive 16-track equipment on the Danish island of Aarhus, put Pitterson and Steel Pulse over the top. Karl Pitterson describes the events plainly. "Someone up there was testing me to see what I could do with the bare minimum, and we got through."

Hinds recalls the bizarre circumstances that led to the arrangement. "There was a label called Genyld, from Scandinavia, that happened to have built a studio and wanted to see how it sounded—hear how it sounded with a reggae band in it. And it was who else but Steel Pulse

that could try it out. So they invited us down, and we got a chance to have access to the studio, and we all got the album out there. It was the ingenuity of Karl Pitterson. That's what got the album together—and the determination of the band. We were desperate, we were angry, and it came off right on time, so give thanks."

True Democracy was released by Elektra in 1982 to immediate critical acclaim in the U.S. In England, where the band released the album on its own label, it flopped. It would be two more years before Steel Pulse would release another album. The next effort, *Earth Crisis*, was an even more progressive effort musically, but many fans noticed a distinctly altered sound from previous works. The main reason, aside from the once again notable absence of Karl Pitterson, was the departure from the group of original

bass, and a series of guitarists, including Carlton Bryan, would fill the lead role.

In addition, the band's fan base had changed almost entirely to the U.S. "I guess a bit of America must have rubbed off somehow. Then in came *Earth Crisis*. So we're not talking about what's happening in our back yard anymore, we started talking about the Earth crisis—with want for a better phrase. And then there was also the change of producer [Jimmy Haynes]. We used the one who didn't really know in depth of reggae. We thought it was time we sort of moved with a sort of different sound, so we'd get familiar with different chords. And get familiar with more technology. So that was the first album we did that was digital."

Despite the changes, *Earth Crisis* went on to further critical acclaim, and Steel Pulse's work

seemed to be cut out when *Babylon the Bandit* was recorded in 1985.

"The producer, Jimmy Haynes, was so overwhelmed with the reception of *Earth Crisis* that he developed a phobia. He wanted to surpass what *Earth Crisis* did, and he wasn't going to settle for anything less now. And all he needed to do at the time was follow the trend that *Earth Crisis* did, and that's come back with exactly the same type of album, 'cause that album was so way ahead of its time concept-wise and execution-wise. And he didn't know that 'cause he wasn't based in the United States and didn't come to the United States as often as we did. He got tied up with a lot of the production and trying to get things perfect. And as a result, the content and the spirit suffered. So by the time we were realizing that, he was exhausted. Everybody was too exhausted



Jamaican Prime Minister P.J. Patterson meets David Hinds during the recording of *Vex* in Jamaica.

guitarist Basil Gabbidon and bass player "Stepper" McQueen (McQueen is credited on the album notes and is pictured in the group photo on the back cover, but Hinds confirms that he actually left the group before the album was recorded), both of whom were identifiable components of the original Steel Pulse sound. Birmingham bassist Alvin Ewen would take over on

to put it the real way we wanted it. By that time it was also the beginning of wondering what direction Steel Pulse was gonna take. I think that album was more evident as far as trying to do something else."

Hinds' tone grows softer and the memories appear less pleasant as he remembers this period of the band's history. "The reception [by

old fans] was the beginning of, 'Well, what the fuck are we hearing here?' That was the beginning. New listeners heard it and said, 'Wow man, we like it.'

"At the time we knew that it was lacking in certain areas, we knew that, but there was nothing we could do, and at the same time we said, 'damn if you do, damn if you don't.' We've always [been] into experiments, and we experimented when we did *Handsworth Revolution*; we didn't know how that was going to be received. We experimented when we did *True Democracy*, and that went down well. We experimented when we did *Earth Crisis*, and that was like another international success. So, we thought, with time people would probably adjust with what we were doing."

Babylon the Bandit, despite earning the band a Grammy for best reggae album of 1986, also earned the band a terminated contract with Elektra due to low sales figures. After two years of floating, Steel Pulse re-emerged in 1988 on MCA Records with an even more shamelessly commercial effort in *State of Emergency*. "I was thinking video," admits Hinds, "'Disco Drop Out,' I was thinking video. You can imagine a guy getting thrown out of a club at the time, that kind of thing. That's how I was thinking. And we were really thinking commercial and thinking where we could be more exposed as opposed to selling just 100,000 units for each album. We wanted to set the pace a bit more."

After that period, which Steel Pulse fans generally consider to be the group's worst sell-out, the band would not be heard from again until 1991, when it hit the road with *Victims*, another crossover attempt that didn't quite catch. The *Victims* tour, however, featured material drawn heavily from the late '70s and early '80s, and a concert recorded in Paris was captured on album (*Rastafari Centennial: Live in Paris, Elysee Montmartre*).

According to Selwyn Brown, the fans' response to the music that made Steel Pulse famous in the early years caused the band to realize its true direction. "We sort of saw, even when a certain dancehall artist took off in a certain way. . . . You could call it a waiting game. We knew that sooner or later people are gonna want to hear roots again, just like in the '70s. We felt that within our hearts. We've been touring every year all over the place. When we tour, we talk with people. People come backstage. They ask us certain things. They criticize certain things. They're curious about certain things. So, we listen to the people, and even within ourselves we knew that people are going to want to

hear something with substance again."

By 1994, things had come full circle for the band from Birmingham. The core group now consisted of David Hinds, Selwyn Brown and Steve Nisbett. In addition to recording *Vex*, Steel Pulse spent the summer headlining the Reggae Sunsplash tour of the U.S., Europe and the Orient. The band also claimed the prestigious headlining spot at Northern California's Reggae on the River festival in August. "The



Karl Pitterson, producer of several of Steel Pulse's most successful albums.

main thing is that we left touring the United States with people saying positive things about the shows and about the album which was the main intention. That was what we went out to do. I've never had such a response with an album since *Earth Crisis/True Democracy*. The response has been tremendous.

"People generally like the songs. They can remember them after first listening. They hear a lot of the other hit albums we've done, [and] they've heard the influence that had, like we've still got it. I think that's the general sense—that Steel Pulse has still got it. And that was something that was in the balance for a long time, as far as the band's career, and as far as where everybody thought we were going. The live album was like a catalyst for that, where they heard the live album and says, 'yeah, they can still do it.' And they heard something like it on some studio work. Obviously we've moved on where grooves have gone more contemporary in some ways, and also the subject matter has sort of deviated slightly to what's going on in today's world as opposed to what was going on in *True Democracy* and the earlier albums."

Ironically, *Vex* marks the first time Steel Pulse has literally returned to its Jamaican roots by recording on the island of its parents. "The

experience was interesting. It was our 10th album. Once again we wanted to experiment. I thought it was necessary to be vibing with the Jamaican people. It was also necessary to see some of them coming into the studio periodically and say 'yes' to the direction we were taking."

Twenty years in the driver's seat of roots reggae's leading band puts Hinds in a unique position to analyze the evolution of the genre in which he has been a key player. While he has strong negative feelings about the slack approach of some dancehall singers, he feels many artists, such as dj Tony Rebel (who is featured on *Vex*) are strictly in the domain of roots music. "Roots is like a concept. I think what people are associating roots with now is a particular energy. Knowing now that dancehall as a music format is really a vehicle for the roots lyrics, it becomes roots, because at the end of the day it's what the lyrics [are saying] that everybody's gonna stick to. I'd say we come from the same tip as well where you also got to adjust and go with the flow of what kind of music is happening out there to air your views."

True to his words, Hinds keeps himself contemporary by incorporating former Boogie Down Productions hip-hop head Sidney Mills and hornmen Jerry Johnson and Kevin Batchelor. "They're out there, you know. Sidney, when he's not touring with us, he's always doing a hip-hop mix. He's more in with the hip-hop flavor than I am. So I tend to vibe off what he's doing, and through that, I develop certain things on my own. Then, I let them all hear it, and they says, 'Yeah, I like the direction. This is what we can do with it.' And they add their two cents, and that's how we've been going, and it's something brand new again. And I don't think any other band is doing it on the tip we're doing it on. And it's still digested as roots."

For Steel Pulse, the 20th anniversary came at just the right time. "It's become a milestone in my career, where I announce I'm turning around and people have accepted that," says a wisened and proudly reflective Hinds. "I told [our fans] we took a road that we in all honesty regretted. We wouldn't have known what would have happened if we didn't take it. We know that now. We made it evident. We've made it documented that that's how it goes. We've been left to do what we do best now, which is our own particular style of reggae."

The author wishes to pay maximum respect to Ras Charles Jones at WHRW-FM, Binghamton, N.Y. for his invaluable knowledge, inspiration, and healthy supply of Steel Pulse bootleg tapes.