

Claims Department





I love ska.

I have for decades, and it doesn't go away. No matter how underground, or how MTV (circa 1996) I just love the blast of the horns, the ching-ghunga of the guitar, and the bass that drives. It's been one of my favorite music genres for decades, and it continues to be.

I've had this issue in mind for ages, and I'm glad I can finally get it out there. The articles are somewhat simple, like the Punk issue (and the Goth issue, coming in 2022) it's mostly me.

But largely, that's because the music is largely me.

I connect music with myself, and specifically with emotion, which is pretty much the purpose. I try, often a little too tightly, the idea of a song or how it sounds with the sensation of my period of listening to it.

The things I love about ska the most? The aesthetic. Checkerboard, black-and-white, pork pie hats, two-tone wingtips, all some of my faves. I also love skinny ties.

As a musical style, it's also something of a rejection of the move of popular music. Setting aside Jamaican ska for a moment (because it has a much more complex history and origin story) the two waves of post-1975 ska fame were both following bursts of punk. In a way, ska is the flip-side of the punk coin. It's complex, it's light-hearted, though not without politics, as I'll talk about later. The simplicity of punk is often over-stated, but the complexity of ska is often ignored. There is actual orchestration required for a lot of ska, and that is in direct contrast to what the punk aesthetic calls for.

So, here are my ska thoughts, presented as a series of articles!

Comments? JohnnyEponymous@gmail.com

The World is Fucked; I've Got a Trumpet - The Thing About Political Ska



Ska ain't supposed to be political right?

Dead. Fucking. Wrong.

Or, at least largely. The first wave of ska wasn't as political as the reggae that flowed out of it. The music then funneled into the UK through Jamaican immigrants. The neighborhoods that these Jamaicans often lived in tended to be the parts of town where lower-to-middle class white working class families lived. This led to an incredible amount of cross-pollination, and from it sprung punk, particularly among the lower classes who encountered the ska, rock steady, and reggae, and ska from the more middle class families. This, of course, is a gross generalization, but it has a truth to it.

2 Tone ska was political in a number of ways. Most bands of the 2-Tone era were integrated racially. The Specials, Bad Manners, The Selecter, The Beat, pretty much every band in the late 70s and early 80s UK ska scene was a combo of racial backgrounds. The notable exception was Madness. They, in many ways, are a special case for someone else to write about. The fact that so many of these bands were integrated in a time when that was not the norm is super-significant in light of Punk Rock, almost lily-white in the UK, though there were several important figures such as Poly Strene and Don Letts who weren't angry white kids.

The topics and lyrics of many songs were politically charged as well. While not nearly as overt as those of punk bands like The Clash and The Sex Pistols, there's no denying that The Specials wrote some songs that were highly political, though far less angry than their punk brethren. *Concrete Jungle* and *Doesn't Make It Right* are anti-violence songs, and later songs like *Racist Friend* and *Free Nelson Mandela* certainly fit the bill. The song *War Crimes* is certainly one as well, with a pointed jab to Israel's side for their actions in the Middle Crises of the 1970s and 80s. *Big in the Body, Small in the Mind* by The Selecter is another that should get attention.

There's an argument that all music is political. That can be applied to just about everything, can't it? The fact is Ska is political. Skinheads have been a part of the ska scene since the beginning, the sub-culture having rose out of punk, and sadly at times that's included Neo-Nazi types. The rise of the National Front and the in-roads it made into the Punk scene (and especially the more working class Oi music scene) meant that there were lots of Nazi skins around the UK music scene, and that certainly included ska. *Concrete Jungle* made references to being chased by racist organization the National Front, for example, and a lot of times it wasn't unusual to see a few laced-up Skins looking to beat down black rude boys after shows. This, of course, lead to the rise of SkinHeads Against Racial Prejudice, SHARPs, a loose association of folks who have been seen around the world at shows since the early 80s. The conflict between skins, and the way that it effected relationships with clubs, especially in London and Birmingham, was one reason a lot of places refused to continue booking ska shows after 1983.

While 2-Tone was certainly more political than the first wave, Third Wave ska was even moreso. In that brackish phase between the two, about 1983 through 1990, a lot of political ska started to bubble up. The Cold War was in full swing, so that was a major focus of a lot of politically fueled ska. The most famous of these is probably Fishbone's *Party at Ground Zero*; It's also one of the best party songs ever written. There's Bop (Harvey)'s classic *Bread and Circuses* which calls out everything from Reagan era military spending to Ollie North.

There were lots of other issues tackled in the lyrics of the 1980s and very early 90s. There's the swing-in' *Coup de Ska* by Beat Soup which should be the rallying song for the Progressive democrats out there. IT opens with one of the greatest first lines in music history – "Down with the bourgeoisie, they don't know how to skank with me-e-e-e." It's a great song, and probably the most pointedly American political ska song up to that point. Current events and racial politics were always a part of things for Skankin' Pickle, and songs like *Ice Cube*, *Korea Wants a Word With You*, *Hate*, *Racist World*, and *David Duke is Running for President*. For a band that was always seen as one of the more goofy fun bands, they got messages. Some bands were known for messages, including Mustard Plug and Ska-P. Mike Park's post-Pickle bands, The Bruce Lee Band and The Chinkees, both have racial messaging throughout their work.

The view of ska as fun, apolitical music or as a scene of young music nerds, just ain't so. It's a complex world, and the music is widely varied. Ska has a political side that sometimes takes a backseat to the beat, but it never fully goes away.



Ska Meets Science Fiction—The Aquabats

When I think of science fiction in music subgenres, it always starts with surf rock.

I mean seriously, from Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet to Los Straitjackets, there's all sorts of SciFi fun. A close second has to be Metal, though they tend towards fantasy and horror.

Ska, though, has my favorite.

The first wave of Ska was pretty straight ahead. Bands like The Skatellites and Desmond Dekker weren't exactly doin' much other than puttin' out danceable hits. The 2-Tone era, roughly 1979 through about 1982, was similar, but more political (as I speak about in another article) but ultimately, it was the period between the 2-Tone era and the Third Wave (early 1990s) that saw the rise of bands that had science fiction ideas and lyrics, and after the initial explosion of the Third Wave, we saw an impressive increase in the number of bands that used science fiction as a setting for their songs, and as a gimmick for their band. The Third Wave gave us a number of excellent SciFi songs, but there's one bad that epitomizes the science fictional world in their entirety of their existence – The Aquabats!

Now, gimmick bands have been around forever. There are bands with backstories that are completely made-up. Sometimes, they're groups of vampires who are playing music, some, like the truly brilliant folks of the Phenomenauts (who come from Eath Capital: Oakland, California), are Science Fiction themed. There's Bloodhag, the Doom Metal band who are actually a science fiction literacy project. George Clinton's projects of the 1970s famously had a running sci-fi theme that gave us Sir Nose D'void of Funk and the Star Child. Ska has had a few of these, but none have had the success, and the goofiness of The Aquabats.

The story of the Aquabats is the story of Aquabania, a gentle tropical island. There, a group of bat-human hybrids arose. Aquabania was then invaded by the evil Super Monster M. The Super Monster invasion drove the bat-people into the sea, where they washed on the shore of Orange County. These Aquabanian refugees were taken in by Professor Monty Corndog. Professor Corndog used his chemistry mastery to give the Aquabats their powers, as well as their equipment: radioactive rashguards, power-belts, and perhaps most important of all, the Anti-Negativity Helmets. With their new powers, they set off to become the world's most popular band to draw millions of followers to help them with their goals.



Ska 101 – The Importance of Compilations in the Pre-Internet

In a decade called The Past, we had no internet.

When you couldn't search the internet for everything, we had to find stuff through more complicated means. IN the ska world, there were a few ways. You could hang out at shows and find people to chat with. You could subscribe to the magazines, which a lot of us did. The way the smart people did it was by going to the record store and buying compilations.

Music compilations were a staple of the music world, but especially the sub-genres of rock that weren't getting major radio or MTV play. I should mention that MTV used to play music videos, and radio was like unpaid Pandora that you could listen to in the car. Those were two of the three major ways people got their music, with record store sales being the other. Nearly every record store had a section for compilations, and if they broke out their subgenres, each one usually had a small section of comps as well. These, in a way, were like the mixtape (not to mention Personics, which I will need to write up someday) in that they allowed you to experience a lot of different things in one condensed package.

Ska comps were especially popular, and I bought tons of them.

Most of the Jamaican records that hit the UK, and US, were singles, though albums did exist and were popular as well. In the 1970s, many of these were collected into compilation records that were the first exposure to a lot of ska fans, and especially the folks who would go on to form bands like The Specials, The Selecter, and The English Beat. The Trojan Story was one of the most important of these early ska compilations, as it was released in 1972 and sold throughout the years. Nearly every major early Jamaican ska act was featured, from Derrick & Patsy, whose *Housewife's Choice* is one of my all-time favorite tracks, to Jimmy Cliff and the Skatalites. After The Specials, Madness, and The English Beat hit, a ton of original Jamaican ska compilations began to flood the market, and these even made it across to the US, including classics like *Intensified*, *Monkey Business*, and *Club Ska 67*.

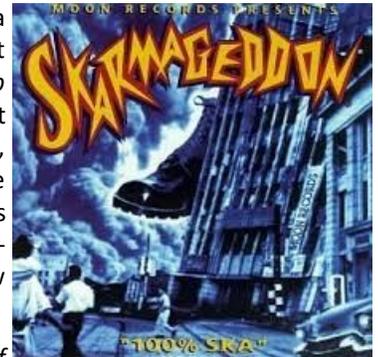
The first significant compilation of the 2-Tone era was *Dance Craze*, which was a film soundtrack that included the movers and shakers of the style. This was really popular and I think it was the best example of the breadth of the world of Ska in England in 1979/80.

Between 2-Tone and Third Wave ska was where the compilation started to take on more significance. In the US, partly spurred on by the release of the 2-Tone ska compilation *This Are Two Tone*, which provided the introduction to The Swinging Cats, Rhoda Dakar, and The Bodysnatchers for many. There were already a couple of comps out there, notably the *Ska-ville USA* compilations that kicked off in 1987. In 1988, what I consider to be the most important ska compilation to the foundation of Third Wave

Ska hit – *Mashin' Up The Nation*.

Mashin' Up the Nation was, without doubt, the single most influential ska album from 1985 to 1990. It featured many of the most important bands of the late 1980s scene, like The Bosstones, Gangster Fun, Bim Skala Bim, and Let's Go Bowling, but really presented an across-the-board view of what was going on. You had horn-driven ska, pop-ska that would be the hallmark of bands like No Doubt, and ska that had certainly drank from the fountain of punk. It's an amazing listen, and an important one.

The rise of the CD made it considerably cheaper to mass-produce releases, and ska bands were fairly well-known for taking any money they could get for their music. A lot of first wave ska compilations came out in the early 90s, including the phenomenal *One Original Step Beyond*. That featured so many brilliant songs that were later covered by the 2-Tone bands. A lot of up-and-coming bands participated in compilations in the early 1990s, and some of these bands, like No Doubt, Save Ferris, Less than Jake, and Reel Big Fish. The best of these tried to cover the entire scene across the world, like the NME's wonderful *Rude Awakening*, or targeted towards individual geographical areas, like *Californnia Skaquake* or *Mash It Up* which documented the Boston scene at the peak of its powers. Arguably, the best series as far as presenting a wide-view was the series of Skarmageddon CDs. These are the best documents of so many bands.



Ska scholar and journalist Aaron Carnes has written about how important the *Misfits of Ska* compilation was. The band list for that one is incredible if you like the ska-punk thing. Mealticket, The Suicide Machines, MU330, Reel Big Fish, Voodoo Glow Skulls, and Skankin' Pickle anchored this one, and it was a big seller.

The key to all of these is the exposure principal. It's the songs by bands like Janitors Against Apartheid that lived alongside work from Reel Big Fish that got them the brush. How many of these albums did I buy because they had one or two bands I knew and loved and ended up loving the other 8 songs way more? I'll tell you, almost all of them.

The rise of Spotify has largely killed off the compilation, though many of those compilations, including *Misfits of Ska*, and that has led to a lot of newer ska fans becoming more deeply involved with older ska bands. The wide availability of so much music that would have been mouldering in a record companies catalog vault in the past has meant that it's much easier to find what you want, even if it makes it a little harder to find what you didn't know that you wanted. The compilation concept was excellent for forcing you to find new bands and music, and it's why they stand today as exceptionally good markers of where we once were.

Scene





~A Review~

AARON CARNES

I'm glad to say that Aaron Carnes is a friend.

We worked together on a documentary about the old Cactus Club in San Jose. He's written about music for Metro, the Silicon Valley's weekly newspaper, and various other publications, and in his previous life, he was in a couple of bands, including Flat Planet, an exceptionally fun ska band. His book, *In Defense of Ska* is one of the most interesting angles you can take in looking at ska, particularly in the third wave.

The title is, in more ways than one, a reference to the NOFX song *Ska Sucks*. The content, though, is not merely a defense of ska as a musical style; it is a history and accounting of ska as musical style, as scene, and as ethos.

I will also note that there's a picture of the back and side of my head from a Flat Planet show at the Edge.

The way the book deals with ska is so smart, it's exactly how I would cover a topic I truly understood and loved. He takes the heart of the subject and refuses to put it in true chronology. The portion that really explains the 1980s actually comes after we've heard so much about the 1990s. There is an awesome discussion of My Boy Lollypop (a great song, so shut up Aaron!) well after we hear about the Pop-Ska-Punk that hit with Reel Big Fish and their ilk. It actually allows for a wonderful sense of reflection, but more than that, a sense of continuation throughout.

There are so many incredible stories that could only be written by someone who was there. The stories about legendary bands like Skankin' Pickle and Not Bob Marley (it'll be a cold day in hell before I call them The Toasters!) are both personal and brilliantly-researched. He has an eye for story, but more importantly, an ear for whose telling makes for the best story.

I can not tell you exactly how deep a dive this book is. The story of Jamaica Ska alone, a song from the 60s (again, great!) covered by Annette Funicello and Fishbone (even better!) goes really deep. He does the same with *My Boy Lollypop*, and that ranks right up there with *Surfin' Bird* as having an incredible story for what seems to be a simple, simple song. The look at the foundation, and death, of so many bands can not be ignored. In particular, it is Skankin' Pickle, Oplvy, and Fishbone, that somehow empower this book. Any history of anything significantly big is going to have gaps. Largely, they're gaps that folks who were know, but might not actually effect the real story. I was in Boston in 1993 through 1997, and that was the epicenter of American ska, and he does a great job covering Bim Skala Bim, but it might short a scene that produced the Mighty Might Bosstones. There's a little coverage of the DC scene, but it never had the national impact that Orange County and NorCal had on Third Wave ska, outside of The Pietasters.

That idea that he is defending the honor of ska by exposing us to its fascinating past is as smart an idea as you can come up with. You can not help but be drawn in by the stories, even if he dismisses *My Boy Lollypop* in much the same fashion a 14 year old Goth girl would a copy of Tiger Beat. The way everything holds together when there is no center save for the idea that ska is vital, ska is relevant, and most important, ska doesn't suck. That is enough to make this a must read for music nerds.



My Favorite Ska Shows
for... Reasons

Let's Go Bowling

Her name was Lauren, and she was 30.

When you're 21, a woman of 30 being interested in you is something of a bit of magic.

She was interested in me because we were at a Let's Go Bowling show and she remembered me, and my Hawaiian shirt, from the Too Much Joy show the week before. I was exhausted, I had pulled one of my 12-3am shifts at the Front Desk the night before and gone to an 8am class. I hung out at the back with a water (I could drink, but I couldn't actually pay for drinks...) sitting on a stool, my elbows and back leaning against the bar, watching them play *Rude 69*.

"Hey," she had a voice like a distant foghorn through the music.

"Howdy," I said.

"You dance?"

"I can polka?"

That was both true and a blatant lie. I could do nothing more than the basic steps.

"Good enough, big man."

And we were off. We got to the floor just as the band kicked into *Este Noche*. She took my hand, squared herself up, and off we went.

If you've ever been to a ska show in a small club, like the Oasis was at the time, there's very little room, and everyone basically skanks in their own little cylinder between themselves and the ceiling. The polka, for those of you who know dance, ain't actually a space-saver of a dance. As soon as I squared myself, and we got to the 2 on the next beat, we were off.

Now, I should, perhaps, have previously set the scene. Me: 5'9, 185 or so, jewfro, and a shirt so loud that Beethoven would be pounding the floor telling me to turn it down. Her, probably 4'10, definitely 30 percent hips, 25 percent bust, 35 smile, 10 percent eyelashes (by volume), and the rest the same energy that forms super-strings. The moment I set us for departure, she put every bit of that energy into floor, propelling us both forward, though somehow I was still leading. That amount of mass, and the speed we attained incredibly quickly, should have spelled disaster.

It did not.

The waters parted. I don't even think anyone really moved, I just think we somehow laid an unconscious path between the raindrops. The entire song we flew about, and we were both giggling the entire time. I looked down into her face, and that smile that could have served as the opening for a Coney Island funhouse, was brighter than any of the stagelights.

The song ended, and she pulled me into a hug.

"That was fun," she said, followed by, "and you're just as sweaty as I am."

She took me back to the bar, and she bought herself a Coke. We chatted for the rest of the show, and we laughed at how the gaps in each of our musical knowledge were exactly where some of our greatest musical love flowed. I'd never heard of Sublime; she'd never heard of Joe Jackson.

Three weeks later, at a Joe Jackson show, I saw her again, and she bounded over with that smile, planted a kiss on my cheek.

"My daughter told me to give you this," she said, pressing a tape into my hands.

It was a bunch of Sublime on side one with Mike Watt on the other.

We danced again, and she was wearing White Shoulders, and it impressed her that I knew that. She took us back to the bar at the back and we chatted, well into the early morning, and she told me about her kid, 7 years old and already practically a music critic, and her Mom, 60-something and a critic about everything else, and most importantly about how she worked with Mark Sandman for ages and had stories about Morphine.

And yes, as always, I blew it. I never got her number, and I never saw her at another show. So, Lauren, if you're reading this, those were great nights.

Perfect Thyroid

I only saw Perfect Thyroid three times.

Even with such limited exposure, they managed to become one of my favorite bands because of the setting the first time I saw them, but specifically where I saw them.

I've found very little about the existence of Club Nocturne in Washington D.C., but I have found literally nothing about the existence of the Checkerboard Club, which was the upstairs venue. I went there twice in the summer of 1993, while an intern at the Smithsonian. The two shows were two weeks apart, and each was impressive. The first was headlined by The Slackers with The Skunks and the first show ever of The Checkered Cabs. The second, though, was The Pietasters and a band called Perfect Thyroid.

To give you an idea of perfect Thyroid, you have to go back to 1993 and think of what ska bands were nationally-touring. You had the five or six big name bands, your Mighty Mighty Bosstones, Dance Hall Crashers, young No Doubt, Skankin' Pickle, The Toasters, and The Specials and Madness were touring at that point. There were plenty of regional bands, though, and Perfect Thyroid were up and down the East Coast. They played a style they called "Funkinutty," which was somewhere between Ska-funk and bouncy pop. They had a frontman who was super-energetic, probably the closest to Angelo Moore of Fishbone I've seen in a ska band, and an excellent keyboard player. They were incredibly tight, the type of 6-piece combo that really feels one another's energies as they go along.

Now, I should talk about the Checkerboard, shouldn't I? It was tiny. How tiny? Glad you asked. Smaller than the living room in which I am writing this. So small. Maybe five strides across at its widest. There was no stage, just an area that I remember as being taped off. The merch tables were in a little landing in front of the stairs. There was a section of checkerboard linoleum, and it looked pretty worn (which I imagine was due to all the skankin' goin on) and the lighting was fairly dim, and I remember the sound 'booth' being more of a folding table.

Ska is not an intimate music. It's big, and doubly-so for bands with horns. Bands in that venue were close, and it was LOUD! A band like Perfect Thyroid filled that freakin' room with sound, and when they hit songs like *Party At My House*, a wonderful Fishbone-like joyfest, it got that entire place moving. So moving that I remember the floor feeling like a trampoline.

I will always remember that show, and though I saw Perfect Thyroid a few more times in Boston (and Providence, I think) this was easily the best of them, because it was as close to the physical spacing as I've ever found for one of those house party movie gigs.



No Doubt

I was early. Probably an hour early.

The Edge was my favorite music venue, and it was a big show. Clubber Lang was opening, and they were amazing. The date was June 1st, 1994, and I was back from Emerson and ready to enjoy a helluva show. The headliners were

SO, there I was, waiting around, and I saw a young tiny blonde woman. She was wearing a big coat and and sunglasses. I, being dumb, decided to go up and make chit-chat.

OK, I might have been trying to hit on her.

In fact, I was.

We chatted a bit, and after a while, she said "So, what do you think of No Doubt?"

Now, up to this point, I had little knowledge of them other than a song on a compilation that I really didn't care for.

"I don't know much about 'em, but I hear they suck."

She sorta tittered, and then out walked Eric Stefani, No Doubt's keyboardist who I recognized from his time as a member of the Simpson's art team who had been profiled in an animation mag I read.

"Hey, Gwen," he said to the lovely young lady, "time for soundcheck."

I hung my head in shame.

She walked off. I had just hit on Gwen Stefani, who within a year would become a huge pop star and now one of the most recognisable figures in American pop culture.

Sigh.

Skankin' Pickle

Los Gatos' greatest band, Skankin' Pickle, was touring.

I was at college, I was excited to see that they were comin' to the Axis in Boston, and I was hyped! They were playin' with Hawaii's own The Tantra Monsters! They were the best ska band that used a conch.

There was a tradition that Pickle had called The Hard Hat. Quite simply it was this – every show, they'd bring a hard hat, white with a Skankin' Pickle on each side. They would have one of these at the show and would throw it into the audience. If you got it, you could go to their shows for free! It was the Holy Grail for ska fans... or at least those of us who thought Skankin' Pickle was the greatest band ever!

The Tantra Monsters were really good, which wasn't always the case for 'em, and then there was Skankin' Pickle! They were second on a bill of three (the headliners were Boston's own The Alstonians) and they opened up their set and blew the doors off the place.

And, about 4 songs in, right after they played my favorite Hulk Hogan, they announced the story of the hard hat, and that they'd be throwing it out to the crowd. Mike Park, Pickle's driving force and the later founder of Asian Man records, then tossed the hat into the crowd. The guy in front of me, about 7 feet tall, reached up to grab it, but instead, he ended up foul-tipping it so that it fell right into my waiting hands.

I could see one of my favorite bands for free! Forever! For a guy who went to shows about twice a week at that point, this was great, and when I went back to California, just a few weeks later, they played there all the time!

Sadly, this was also the last time I saw them. They never seemed to be playing when I was free, and worse, broke up for good not too long later.

Still, I had the hat!

Claims Department: Bigfoot

Deadline—April 10

