

Hepcat

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Ogden Street Music Hall
Buffalo, NY

Hepcat is a styling 9 piece roots-drawing band bailing from southern California. Dual vocal harmonies combined with an authentic ska sound have made them one of the top-movers in the US scene, with their latest record, "Scientific" as solid proof. I had the rare opportunity to catch them live this past fall, and the show was one hell of a good time. Afterwards, I spoke with keyboardist Deston Berry about the band and the state of the ska revival today.

Hepcat interview with Deston Berry, take one.

Can you give me a brief history of the band?

Sure. Okay, we started around late '89, actually probably closer to 1990. I got together with Greg Lee, the singer and our other vocalist, Alex Desert. Unfortunately, Alex was unable to come on tour with us because he's an actor and pretty busy right now.

Isn't he supposed to be in the new movie *Swingers*?

DB: Yeah, he's going to star in that, watch for it. So Greg, Alex, and myself, actually it was their idea, they said do you want to start a rocksteady band? I was like, yeah right, because I didn't think it would get off the ground... but we kept trying at it, found some members, found that guy over there (Efrin Santana, tenor sax) and a drummer. We started movin' and the bass came along, and now we're just taking it from there.

What influenced you most to form Hepcat?

Was it just your collective musical influences or what?

DB: It's pretty much the music we were listening to around '89-'90. The core members of the band, Greg, Alex, myself and our drummer Greg Narvas, we were all into the same music, the older sounds. We like the third generation too, except that we all were / are pretty much more rooted into the older stuff and that factor is what motivated us to play traditional-like ska. So just by talking with the other guys and hangin' out, we got together, played a few cover songs basically pretty well, and then said, hey you know what.. let's keep trying at this, see what happens, and that's how Hepcat got off the ground.

How do you feel the Third Wave is evolving?

Or is it in decline?

DB: That's an interesting question, because it's different throughout America. I mean there's a lot, actually there's a TON of ska bands today. But on our side of the country, on the west coast there's been a build up of a traditional sound, yet throughout the country the trend is a newer style of rock and other influences, because every band has its

roots, and that's cool. It's just pretty much a melting pot of all different styles. There's ska-core, then traditional like us. Though, I probably wouldn't even consider ourselves traditional, I guess we'd be neo-traditional, because we do have our own sound. It's not like a lot of others, and basically every band has their own sound.

What's it like back home? Are you from Los Angeles originally?

DB: Originally? No, I'm not from L.A. I moved there back in the '80s. It's.... Do you mean the scene or ska in general?

Both.

DB: Both. Okay see that's the thing, just like with any scene, it dies down and builds up with new bands and new things. Right now there's a big, big, skinhead scene which really rose in the last 3 years. That's pretty much all you see as far as ska is concerned. I'd have to say it's more of on the traditional side. There are other bands, but for the great majority its rootsy.

Do you have favorite cities or bands to perform with?

DB: The favorite band, as far as ska is concerned is Skatalites, that's my favorite band, and believe me, I have a lot. I like The Paragons, Wailers, Techniques, I like older stuff. I don't listen to it all the time though. When we come together as Hepcat, we know that we have to play this kind of music. Favorite places to play are probably Chicago, anywhere in Europe, Amsterdam, Switzerland, we went to Germany which was great..

Are there any particular places where your audience is larger than others?

DB: In America, I think our largest audience is our hometown L.A., as far as the scene goes.

Has the band lineup changed since your 1993 debut *Out of Nowhere*, and if so, what has changed & how?

DB: Yes, it has changed. Well, actually before that *Out of Nowhere*, our original guitarist left and we got Dennis Wilson (on guitar), but he's not with us anymore either, he was with us for about a year, and then when we were recording *Scientific*, our original guitarist (Lino Trujillo) came back to join us. Now we have a brand new guitarist, which is Joey over here... Say hi Joey... We added a new saxophonist Efrin, and he's been with us for three years. Also, our trumpet player, Kincaid Smith was added for *Scientific*.

Yes. That's on BYO Records based in L.A., and before that, the classic *Out of Nowhere* is on Moon. What made you switch labels? Is it because BYO is closer to home?

DB: Yeah, it's pretty much closer to home, actually right around the corner from us. Besides, our contract with Moon was ending anyway. BYO was looking for new talent at the time, ...so that's why we made the switch.

I thought it seemed odd, because you're only one of like two ska bands on a mostly punk rock label.

DB: I don't even know. Are there any other ska bands on Better Youth Organization Records?

Currently it's you guys and Bouncing Souls, but some don't consider them a ska band, and some do.

DB: Ok.

Who came up with the band's logo?

DB: You mean the cat with the blunt? That was done by our original drummer, Greg Narvas, who's been in the band for about six years, who just recently left.

He wanted to get on with his life, go to school, stuff like that. He's a great artist and he has funny ideas about drawing and stuff.

The reason I ask is because at my college, I go to school in Rochester, and around Halloween this year the dorm had a Jack-O-Lantern carving contest – and his design won 3rd prize on my pumpkin. It got beat out by a Gene Simmons [KISS] melon and some other squash that didn't deserve 2nd prize, which escapes me at the moment.

DB: Are you serious?

Dead. I'd have taken a picture to show you guys, but it rotted too quickly.

JOEY: Didn't someone do that?

DB: When we played on Halloween night, someone brought one to our show and we had it on stage.

It was pretty fantastic!

Do you have a favorite 2Tone band?

DB: 2Tone? Yes I have a favorite 2Tone band actually. That would be The Selecter, as far as the 2Tone record label goes. My favorite band from that era though was The Beat, because they did things other bands didn't do. For instance, I like dub. I like dub music very much and the Beat did a lot of that. But strictly labelwise, I'd say Selecter, hands down.

You guys have a good amount of soul influence in your music, so who is your favorite soul singer?

DB: Personally, I like Otis Redding a lot. Other members like James Brown... With 3 part harmonies, it'd be The Impressions.. that everyone agrees on for vocal inspiration.

What's next on the agenda for Hepcat?

DB: After we finish this tour in five days, we're going to go back into the studio, and try to record some new stuff in December & January. Hopefully we'll have a new record by March or April '97...that might really happen too, so look forward to it, 'cause we're looking forward to it.

What do you think about 2\$ bottled waters and slinkies hanging from the ceiling?

DB: Ha ha ha. Well I like the slinkies, they're phat.

JOEY: We obviously didn't drink water...

(All glance over at the long table strewn with innumerable empty beer bottles and cans, courtesy Hepcat with the much expected assistance from Mighty Mighty Bosstones)

DB: That was a weird question, I didn't know how I should answer it. I liked the slinkies.

JOEY: Slinkies work better though when you have stairs, you know... the whole physics thing, & gravity.

DB: Yeah, but when they're hanging you can tap them and they squiggle.

How did Buffalo's audience tonight rank amongst the other cities?

DB: Buffalo was really really amazing, because I didn't think so many people would come to the show, especially on a Wednesday night. Again, it's the Bosstones.

As far as reception for Hepcat, I was like "Whoa!" and the attendance, there was just a lot of people who came out tonight and that's great.

It's been like that so far throughout the Midwest.

The Bosstones play a lot of colleges, did you play many with them this tour?

DB: We have played in college towns, just a couple, but we don't really do that sort of thing. This was our second college-town show.

When I saw that Hepcat was touring with the Bosstones, I thought that was kinda cool because I know that so many people are so divided on the subject of traditional Jamaican style vs. the more punk ska-core style. So when I see these two masters in their own respects, I find it very commendable both chose to team up in order to expose more kids to the roots of the genre. That's important, especially with musics such as Ska & Reggae.

DB: Yes, definitely. Exactly. That's what they (Bosstones) thought too. They have helped us out a lot and I am very grateful they decided to take us out on the road with them. It's cool. It's been cool, really cool.

Cool indeed. We only ask cool people this next question, so when taking a shit, do you crumple, roll, or fold the toilet paper?

JOEY: Crumple and roll!

DB: Same for me.

(Joey then proceeds to explain the intricate workings of toilet paper)

JOEY: You know, sometimes you crumple and there's too many ridges and its like...your fingers get it, aw fuck that, so you have to roll it, but you don't want to roll it 'cause then its too much... 3/4 crumple here, or did we get too into this question? That's a good question because no one has ever asked us that before, so we ponder on that one.

Do you do many interviews?

DB: Actually, this tour we've had the most. This is probably our eighth one thus far.

You probably can't speak for the whole band, but what do you want for Christmas?

DB: I know what I want for Christmas... NINTENDO 64! No I'm just kidding. I want a house, that's what I want for Christmas. I don't have a house right now. I left my old house and will not be going back. What do you want for Christmas, Joey?

JOEY: Another guitar!

DB: I can't speak for the band collectively because it's kinda hard.

JOEY: ...The light haired girl last night...

(We all laugh)

DB: ha ha, I think we all want that!

Well many thanks to Deston Berry & Guitar Joey from Hepcat for their time. Peace out!

Hepcat rarely tours in the East and practically never outside large cities. Keep this in mind if and when they play somewhere near you, don't miss their show! Look for the band on this summer's Warped Tour. I send mad props out to Zoe E. and WTR FM's 'Lil Davie, without whom I would not have conducted this & ya wouldn't have been reading it.

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