

# Review

MUSIC WEEK

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by Ajax Scott

## Reggae veteran still winning respect

For most people, a 25th anniversary is an opportunity to look back and reminisce - but not David Rodigan. Last weekend found him onstage in front of a sell-out crowd at the Ocean venue in east London, competing with four of the top reggae sound systems in the world in a bid to win the UK Cup Clash 2003. It may be a quarter of a century since the veteran reggae broadcaster first took to the air on Radio London back in the spring of 1978, but Rodigan has certainly not slowed down the pace.

As it turned out, the radio veteran was not able to pull a victory out of the bag this time with Tony "Mentally III" Matterhorn taking the cup back to New York, yet the fact that

Rodigan - arguably the only UK selector still operating on this kind of level - was doing it at all spoke volumes.

As a Moby-winning radio presenter, who has spanned both specialist shows and mainstream daytime, Rodigan has few equals. "He's in my top three all-time broadcasters," says presenter and author Charlie Gillett. "It's a major achievement to be such a fanatic and keep a place in mainstream radio. Without changing himself, he's still recognizable as the guy who first started out. He has this special combination of consummate professionalism and passion for music."

Radio One music policy editor Alex Jones Donnelly, who worked alongside Rodigan at Kiss 100, describes him as 'the constant voice of reggae broadcasting in the UK and the globe over the past 25 years - his crystal clear tone simply demands respect from listeners and artists alike'.

But Rodigan's sphere of activity extends way beyond his weekly shows on Kiss (which he joined in 1990) and the British Forces Broadcasting Service (where he reaches a potential audience of 22m including soldiers currently serving in Iraq). He still hosts his

own weekly London club night after 24 years and regularly tours elsewhere in the UK, continental Europe, America and the Caribbean. Meanwhile, he is helping to organize the first International Sound System Festival in Germany and he has just compiled a retrospective 25th anniversary compilation double CD. A highly personal yet deliberately mainstream selection, the album is the first to be released on Emap's own

in-house label and is currently being promoted heavily across all the media company's brands.

It is rare enough in this era of radio consolidation and central playlisting that a purist music champion such as Rodigan should still be broadcasting at all. After all, despite the odd crossover hit such as Sean Paul's Gimme The Light, reggae sadly remains as far on the fringes of the mainstream as at almost any time since ska first exploded in the Sixties. But then Rodigan, who also spent 11 "golden years" at Capital before joining Kiss, where he has hosted everything from breakfast and drivetime shows to his current specialist late night slot, has survived because he is the true professional.

Ultimately, he says, the single reason why he still keeps going is the very same reason that he first started Wing in youth clubs as a 15-year-old in 1966 and then entered radio: "passion for music".

"I have always enjoyed listening to presenters who care about their music. It 'needn't be 'something I know m about - even better z if I don't. It's all about sharing. The passion for the music is everything and audiences can feel that," he says. "Radio has become homogenized. Now people listen to stations rather than presenters, but within station formats you can still create appointments to listen."

He has a deep love of radio, citing Capital Radio legend Roger Scott as his mentor and name-checking other music radio legends such as Peter Young, Dave Cash, Robbie Vincent and Charlie Gillett as inspirations. And, over the years, Rodigan has helped break initial chart hits by artists as diverse as Errol Dunkley (OK Fred), Sugar Minott (Good Thing Going), Shaggy (Oh Carolina) and Beenie Man (Who Am I) by securing them mainstream playlist support.

On air, Rodigan clearly loves nothing more than sharing new and classic artists with his dedicated listeners, but live he adopts an approach that is different not only to that of mainstream club DJs, but also most reggae DJs. In part it revolves around giving key records a spoken build-up in the great reggae tradition.

"You must put the song on a pedestal," he says. "Great songs and magnificent recordings need to get that attention. When the picture is revealed by playing it, hopefully it has more impact."

But, as befits someone who trained at drama school and has a string of stage and screen appearances to his credit (among them cult film *The Warp Reaction*), there is also a more theatrical element that has seen him come on stage in sound clashes disguised as a race jockey or Sikh taxi driver. And then there are the exclusive one-off dub plates and skits recorded by top artists that are essential to any sound clash - Rodigan even enlisted Chris Tarrant to record a *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* spoof which showed up the ignorance of the competing selectors.

Incongruous as it may seem, all this has meant that over the years Rodigan has built up deep respect among grassroots fans without ever compromising or pretending to be something he is not. "The respect I have been given by the black community in England, Jamaica and America has touched me deeply. For people to come up to you and shake your hand and thank you for playing the music means a lot," he says, with genuine humility. "It doesn't come easy. The public is not easily fooled. If you're just riding a bandwagon, you will get found out."

And that respect extends outside the Jamaican diaspora. Rodigan has latterly assumed a greater statesman role in continental Europe, and nowhere more so than in Germany, where his BFBS show helped inspire a whole generation of musicmakers.

In the age of superstar DJs, there can only be a handful of UK music industry figures who can genuinely make such a claim. At a time when UK radio is losing some of its most distinctive voices, Rodigan is something of an overlooked national treasure deserving wider recognition. It seems that, so long as he is given airtime, he has many more years of service to the music and the fans he holds so dear in him. Ajax Scott