

ON DISC

THE ENGLISH BEAT
I Just Can't Stop It

(Sire) The English Beat know how to throw a mean curveball. Two blacks and three whites from Birmingham who are part of the British ska revival that includes the Specials, Selecter and Madness, the Beat juggle black and white music so quickly and deftly that one emerges from their debut album wondering how the hell they did it. Is the frenzied "Click Click" ska or rock & roll? What's a Mersey guitar line doing against a ska rhythm in "Best Friend"? Or, for that matter, a Byrds jingle-jangle guitar in "Two Swords"?

Beats me. But I can say this: *I Just Can't Stop It* is a landmark album. A good place to start is with their version of the old Smokey Robinson hit, "Tears of a Clown." Just after the grand introductory riff, the Beat pitches a rhythm that is speedy, tense, seemingly out of whack. Is this Motown or is it ska? Is the bass guitar chasing the sax or is it the other way around? With truckloads of scratchy guitar work, snaky bass runs and exotic sax passages, the Beat create a sound that is soulful, dangerous, irresistible and distinctly urban. One can practically hear the buzz of the neon. The vocals clinch their sound: whether they're straight-ahead, echoed or involved in a call-and-response discussion, they have but one purpose: to create tension.

I must have played *I Just Can't Stop It* at least a half dozen times before even beginning to zero in on the lyrics—they whizz by so quickly. "Mirror in the Bathroom" eloquently mocks self-possession, while the protagonist in "Click Click" is like Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver*. Suck on this: "Open your mouth/Slide the barrel in/If you don't like it/Just don't do it again." Great poetry! This fascination with power also runs through such songs as "Hands Off . . . She's Mine" and "Big Shot," which throws darts at our leaders and points up our own passivity.

I think the essence of the English Beat can be found in "Whine & Grind/Stand Down Margaret." Over a walking-on-eggs reggae/ska rhythm, we hear a sweet sax, a polite guitar and vocals which pleasantly croon: "I see no joy/I see only sorrow/I see no chance/of a bright new tomorrow." Like I said, these guys throw a mean curveball.

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