

REGGAE COWBOYS

Stone Ranger is the long-awaited third North American release for the Reggae Cowboys. Four Caribbean ex-pats, based in Toronto, Canada, they are winning countless fans worldwide with their heart-rollicking reggae-based sound. Layering influences that include a mix of Caribbean genres, rock & roll and six-string spaghetti-western drama over reggae's "one-drop" riddim, Stone Ranger has come up with a unique sonic twist that points to a spiritual kinship between the pioneering black cowboys of the wild wild west and the rough rhythm riders of the equally untamed Jamaican music scene.

Lead guitarist/lead singer/producer Stone Ranger steps front and center with this set, writing all tracks except the two cover songs – Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode' and Bob Marley's 'Concrete Jungle'. More hard driving than their previous releases, Stone Ranger employs layered, overdriven guitars, a big drum sound and their trademark reggae bass lines, while still maintaining the band's hook-driven melodies and powerful vocals.

The band was formed in Toronto in 1993. "We set out to be different," recalls Stone Ranger aka Bird Bellony, who was raised in Dominica, Guadeloupe, Martinique and Paris before coming to Toronto 15 years ago. A fan of Jimi Hendrix, Santana, The Meters, and The Staple Singers, as well as such seminal Caribbean music giants as the Mighty Sparrow, Shadow, the Skatalites, Bob Marley, Ken Lazarus, Pluto Shervington, and Jimmy Cliff, he was also intrigued by the African-American cowboys of America's pioneer days. He launched an intensive study, and "everything fell into place," he recalls. "I thought the sound should be different from everyone else. If we're called Reggae Cowboys, we should sound like cowboys, which means that ours is a guitar-based band, with every other element working from the guitars. I think of our sound as a unique juxtaposition."

Bellony's first composition for the group, "Searching for the Outlaw," set the template for the signature Reggae Cowboy style with the slide guitar at the center, as opposed to classic reggae's focus on heavy-duty bass lines. The song appeared in the Cowboys' first album, *Tell the Truth*, released independently in 1995 in Canada and in the U.S., in 1996, through Pure/Mercury Records.

A revelation for listeners, their *début* earned the band its loyal North American following. Immediately embraced by Triple A and college radio, it brought this stellar review from Timothy White, Editor-in-chief of *Billboard Magazine* and author of "Catch a Fire" the quintessential biography of Bob Marley:

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"Expect some fever-in-the-bunkhouse fun this year from this dreadlocked posse of high plains drifters, whose beautifully crafted blend of riddims makes for a memorable shootout at the conscious dancehall corral. Combining authentic sagas of black cowboy culture with full-bandolier roots ammunition, Reggae Cowboys have made a proud, hip authoritative record loaded with plenty of crossover firepower. There are no bum steers on this all-original set, although the likely single 'Cowboy Riddim' is – ahem – a killer; with 'Tell the Truth' and 'Searchin' for De Outlaw' both worthy follow-ups.

The stagnant reggae scene needs a ruff'n tuff live act like Reggae Cowboys to revitalize things in '97, and as this fine album catches on in the U.S. and U.K., look for the band to revive a storied subgenre, sparking heritage-minded resurrections of the wild west reggae of the late '60's and early '70's."

In 1999, the group's Tumbleweed label released **Rock Steady Rodeo** independently in Canada and via Rykodisc in the U.S. The CD booklet features an action photo of Jesse Stahl, another pioneering black cowboy and rodeo champ. "Geronimo," a hit track from that sophomore set, tells the story of the fabled Indian chief's heroic struggle for his land. "If we're going to talk about black cowboys, we have to talk about the first people on the land," Stone Ranger notes. **Rock Steady Rodeo** showcases the band's seamless integration of reggae and country-western music and garnered this review from Billboard:

"Effortless and natural, the Cowboys' fusion of western themes and reggae riddims actually rediscovers a musical synthesis found in reggae's early years, when the island was tuning into American country and western music, along with seminal R&B...."

In 'Rock Steady Rodeo,' the reggae one-drop beat - laid out by rhythmic slashes of keyboards and rhythm guitar and syncopated baselines makes for an easy-rocking foundation for the band's greatest asset, Stone Ranger's tasteful six-string architecture. Soaring without showboating, his fluid guitar passages are studded with evocative signatures from the soundtrack to American cowboy culture, real and imagined, past and present."

"The response from audiences has been great," says Stone of their live performances. "People always say they've never heard anything like it. They really get off, especially when they see the band live. We are a reggae band, but I consider us more of a band with a reggae foundation and everything on top - blues, rock, a little country, and there has to be some calypso roots in there. People in America usually say, 'I don't like reggae; I'm not used to it, but I love you guys.' So there must be something in there for them. We're winning the battle, though we still have a few years to fight this war. I think we'll win."

One of the Cowboy's tactics has been to share stage bills with reggae hit-makers like Maxi Priest, Third World, Bunny Wailer, Toots & the Maytalls, as well as the Marleys, Erykah Baduh, and Lauryn Hill at the annual Marley Family Fest in Miami, FL. The Cowboys have also often found themselves in the unique position as the sole reggae band performing at large music festivals, playing alongside the likes of Wide Spread Panic, Patti Labelle, Los Lobos, The Doobie Brothers, Gladys Knight, and the Temptations, among others.

Like Blues Traveler and other rock groups who barnstormed the way to a major label contract and big time success, the Cowboys are building their fan base “from live playing, a lot of live playing,” says Stone. “We’re on the road at least 8 months a year, touring North America and Europe.”

In much the way the U.K.'s Steel Pulse once lent a new urban excitement to “roots” style reggae, this latest set from the Reggae Cowboys injects fresh energy into the form and brings more ears to the party. Their blend of musical influences, highlighted by distinctively loping accents from the wide-open Great Plains of yesteryear, brings to reggae a welcome breath of revival.