

English Beat rocks despite issues at Vinyl



The English Beat rocked Hard Rock Lake Tahoe on Feb. 7.
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Boot/UrbanImage.tv

By Kim Wyatt

STATELINE – Tahoe is going to have some sore knees, and it's no thanks to snow. The English Beat brought its signature ska to a lively show at the newly opened Hard Rock Hotel and Casino Saturday night. The almost two-hour set was packed with crowd-pleasing tunes that afforded the largely middle-aged mob a chance to bop and fist pump to the late seventies Birmingham sound.

Progenitors of the 2-Tone ska revival, The English Beat brought hit after hit to the audience of a few hundred, who seldom stopped dancing. Founding Beat member, vocalist, and lead guitar player Dave Wakeling, a rebel in a red polo shirt, brought an impish charm to a show riddled with sound issues.

The concert was staged at Vinyl – formerly the Cabaret – touted by the Hard Rock as an “intimate” setting. Intimate is right. A few dozen folding chairs lined the wall, and tall tables were scattered randomly on the dance floor in the tiny

showroom. Since this was The English Beat, the expectation was that we would not be sitting, but it's a fairly bleak environment in contrast to the vibrant scene just outside the door. A porta-bar in the corner provided the best cocktail value at the Hard Rock.

Because this is the Hard Rock, I reasoned, perhaps they focused on the sound in the smaller venue, rather than its appearance. I expected the Hard Rock to have state-of the art-sound. But the sound was unbalanced and muddled, with lyrics to even the most straightforward songs, like "Sooner or Later" and General Public's hit "Tenderness," unintelligible. Fortunately, the audience knew the words and helped carry the songs through.

Wakeling was joined by band members Rhythmm Epkins (drums, vocals), Matt Morrish (sax, vocals), Kevin Lum (keyboards, vocals), Larry Young (bass, vocals) and Jared Palazzolo (guitar, vocals). Sharing the stage on this leg of the tour, Trinidadian reggae singer King Schascha brought the rasta, calling for love and unity, and Roddy Radiation, formerly of the Specials, guested for a three-song set injecting the show with some Specials-style cool.

In addition to English Beat hits, the band performed songs from Wakeling's post-English Beat band with Ranking Roger, General Public. The English Beat also performed three great covers, "Tears of a Clown," "I'll Take You There," and "Can't Get Used to Losing You." And in testimony to Wakeling's songwriting talent, even the new songs sounded like hits.

But the sound. The sound was so inconsistent it detracted. Wakeling, visibly frustrated by a lack of communication with the sound crew, carried on.

"I hope you can hear my vocals, because I can't," he said during "I Confess," a song that must have been vocally challenging even in his prime. During other songs, instruments

would drop off or disappear.

Yet the hits kept coming, culminating in a rocking performance of the 1980 anthem "Mirror in the Bathroom."

In the end, fans are willing to forgive a lot to fist pump for a night. I wanted to muse here about mortality and nostalgia – these were the songs of my freshman year in high school (and music is probably the only part I want to remember). The English Beat is now an oldies act. Even so, the writers of infectious songs that have permeated our culture should have better sound. While it's great to have another affordable music venue in town, here's hoping that Vinyl gets a tune-up.

Kim Wyatt was an arts reviewer for the Anchorage Daily News and now owns Bona Fide Books in Meyers.