

## INTRODUCTION

# Bring on the Horns

On June 28, 1997, about 14 months before he began hosting *TRL* and became Dick Clark for the dial-up generation, Carson Daly presided over the most glorious and bewildering programming block in MTV history. It was called *MTV Skaturday*, and for two hours, while enthusiastic extras skanked around the beach house, Daly introduced nothing but ska videos. He wore a black suit, black hat, and skinny tie, the standard uniform of the rude-boy subculture. This really did happen.

*MTV Skaturday* represented a surreal pinnacle for the “third wave” of ska, a movement that had been building since the ’80s. In 1994, *Billboard* ran a story about ska being the next big thing. The *New York Times* followed suit in 1995, the same year Bay Area punks Rancid took their infectious “Time Bomb” to #8 on *Billboard*’s Modern Rock Tracks chart. (The chart became known as Alternative Songs in 2009 and Alternative Airplay in 2020.) Goldfinger and No Doubt cracked the Top 10 of that tally with ska or ska-like songs in 1996. The summer of ’97 belonged to Sublime’s “Wrong Way,” Reel Big Fish’s “Sell Out,” and the Mighty Mighty Bosstones’ “The Impression That I Get,” which hit #1 on Modern Rock Tracks.

Ska had arrived in America, and it sounded nothing like it did when it left Jamaica 30 years earlier. Born in the late ’50s, just before Jamaica gained independence from Great Britain, ska was fast, brassy, optimistic music informed by American jazz and R&B and the island’s own mento

sound. Ska was built around the almighty “offbeat,” with guitar, piano, and sometimes horns adding distinctive rhythmic chops in between the beats: one *and* two *and* three *and* four.

Trends come and go quickly in Jamaica, and by the mid-’60s, ska had mellowed into rocksteady, which in turn became reggae, the nation’s most famous and lasting cultural export. Ska might’ve been forgotten had it not been for 2 Tone, a U.K. record label that spawned its own youth movement in the late ’70s. Multiracial 2 Tone bands like the Specials, the Selecter, and the English Beat updated ska for their time and place. As Britain grappled with high unemployment and flaring racial tensions, the rolling buoyancy of Jamaica ska gave way to tense, anxious songs about racism, sexual politics, and Cold War paranoia.

While 2 Tone was never as big in the U.S. as it was in the U.K., where the label’s first seven singles were Top 10 hits, many of the bands enjoyed a modicum of stateside success. Every third-wave American ska band took something from 2 Tone, though few focused on the politics at the heart of the movement.

There are some notable exceptions, but generally, American ska in the ’90s was strikingly apolitical. This was in keeping with the overall trajectory of popular music in the ’90s. At the beginning of the decade—a time marked by the Gulf War, the L.A. riots, and an economic recession—angsty grunge and nihilistic gangsta rap were all the rage. By the latter half of the ’90s—with Bill Clinton in the White House and the economy kicking ass like Xena, warrior princess—sun-and-fun bands like Sugar Ray and Smash Mouth had begun crashing alternative radio playlists. Pearl Jam and Soundgarden were still huge, but so were Green Day and the Offspring, pop-punk bands with a sense of humor. Hip-hop, meanwhile, went from Glocks and chronic to the bombastic shiny-suit bling-rap of Puff Daddy. The shift culminated with the rise of teen pop in 1999, but not before ska and one other genre characterized by dudes with horns got some mainstream love.

Like third-wave ska, the swing revival had been growing organically for years. It began with the formation of Royal Crown Revue in Los Angeles in 1989 and spread to other cities, most notably San Francisco. The sound most often rehashed by neo-swing groups was not swing in the big band sense, but rather jump blues, a juiced-up '40s R&B precursor that often sounds a lot like rock 'n' roll. When third-wave ska finally broke in '97, it primed the world for retro-swing a year later.

However corny neo-swing wound up looking to outsiders, it started out pretty punk. "Our contemporaries were all into grunge," says Michael Moss, the San Francisco scenester who started *Swing Time* magazine in 1995. "They're walking around with their grungy clothes and their Nirvana wannabe lookalikes, and we were wearing zoot suits and crazy vintage fashions and looking sharp all the time. Suddenly, being sharp was punk."

The rise of ska can also be seen as a direct reaction to grunge. "That shit's great, but after a while it's kind of like, 'Gee, I'm depressed with this stuff,'" says Jon Pebsworth of Buck-O-Nine, who scored an alternative hit in 1997 with "My Town." "When you hear something like the Bosstones, all of a sudden you're like, 'Wow, this is fun. It's more musical, and it's easier on the ear.'"

Ska and swing overlapped in terms of fans and musicians, especially on the West Coast, where both scenes were the largest. When ska got hot in '97, followed by swing in '98, it was easy for the most casual, least informed alt-rock radio listeners to conflate the two. But there were crucial differences that went beyond musicology. Ska had been building longer, and the level of instrumental proficiency required to start a band was way lower. Consequently, the number of ska groups at all levels—MTV crossover down to local VFW shows—greatly exceeded the number of swing outfits.

Ska also lent itself better to hybridization. While the New Morty Show played kitschy covers of Metallica and Billy Idol songs, and Lee Press-On and the Nails invented "goth-swing," few retro-swing bands really got into the hyphen game. Third-wave ska, meanwhile, splintered off into ska-punk,

ska-core, ska-jazz, ska-soul, and even metal-ska (check out underrated Boston-area greats Thumper). Mephiskapheles played satanic ska. Five Iron Frenzy and the O.C. Supertones were Christian. The Aquabats wore superhero costumes to perform their nerdy New Wave ska.

For as many bands as there were touring nationally, releasing albums, and landing songs on all-important compilation CDs, many released on the seminal NYC label Moon Ska, ska never really got *that* big. Of all the groups that made it onto MTV in some capacity—and there were plenty—only No Doubt, Sublime, Rancid, and the Mighty Mighty Bosstones have platinum albums. Of those, you might argue that only the Bosstones count as a ska band.

Thanks to the 1996 film *Swingers* and the Gap's 1998 "Khakis Swing" commercial, retro-swing was way more of a fad. That translated to a shorter shelf life but higher record sales. Cherry Poppin' Daddies sold 2 million copies of 1997's *Zoot Suit Riot*. Squirrel Nut Zippers, who notched a surprise hit with the fire-and-brimstone calypso curio "Hell" in 1997, moved a million copies of their 1996 sophomore album, *Hot*. Big Bad Voodoo Daddy went platinum with 1998's *Americana Deluxe*. Brian Setzer Orchestra, who savvily released a version of Louis Prima's "Jump, Jive an' Wail" right after the Gap featured the original in its much-discussed TV spot, went double platinum with 1998's *The Dirty Boogie*.

Looking back through a twenty-first-century lens of political correctness, it's possible to view retro-swing as a little reactionary. Its sounds and aesthetics recalled an idyllic time when men wore hats, women favored lipstick and heels, and everything was right in the world. But these were ex-punks in San Francisco and L.A.—there was no MAGA element to the movement. "The swing scene was made up of incredibly intelligent people that were subversive and hip, before it got watered down," says Moss. "These were not misogynists. These were strong women that would kick your ass. Nobody was on that dance floor if it wasn't for the girls. They learned how and taught us and made us do it."

Compared to other genres, ska also presented safe spaces for females. “In hardcore punk, you’d go to the shows and it was, like, 80 percent dudes,” says Dave Kirchgessner of Michigan ska-punks Mustard Plug. “Ska was great because it was a lot more open both in terms of there being girls at the shows, and it was theoretically way more open racially.”

Simply put, ska and swing was music that allowed you to dress up (or not) and go dance. The lack of political content in much of the day’s ska and nearly all of the swing reflected the times perfectly. For the mostly white teenagers and 20-somethings driving both scenes, this was precisely the right music for those final years before 9/11, when America was dreaming and didn’t even know it. The period from 1991 to 2001 was the longest economic expansion in U.S. history to date, and from 1997 to 2000 GDP growth each year topped 4 percent, a number the nation hasn’t seen since. During the Clinton years, America’s only wars were in obscure places like Bosnia and Kosovo, and the handful of U.S. combat deaths wasn’t going to be the thing that shaped your opinion of Slick Willy. Why not skank it up or jump, jive, and wail?

Neither ska nor swing was built to last as a mainstream phenomenon. By 1999, oversaturation and the industry’s need for the next “next big thing” had killed both. There was also a substantial media backlash that’s never gone away. In May 2016, when the music website Stereogum ran a story called “Let’s All Remember the Late ’90s Swing Revival,” the first comment on the article read, “COUNTERPOINT: Dear God, please let’s not.”

For many, the mere mention of ska conjures images of goofy white guys in checkered pants running in place as inept high school band geeks yell “Pick it up!” and mangle the rhythms of the Skatalites. In 2005, when dance-rock was king, Brandon Flowers of the Killers dissed Sam Endicott of the Bravery for once playing in a ska band called Skabba the Hut. It was soon revealed that Killers drummer Ronnie Vannucci had been in a ska band called Attaboy Skip. *Spin* had a field day with the feud, publishing a full-page “Ska-letons in the Closet” chart exposing other rockers’

secret ska pasts. When New York City mayor and presidential candidate Bill de Blasio professed his love of ska during a 2019 TV interview, Twitter mocked him for the rest of the day.

So why this book-length exploration, defense, and celebration of frequently maligned sounds that temporarily captured imaginations in the '90s? In addition to being vibrant music perfectly suited for those peaceful, prosperous years before 9/11, ska and swing encouraged and rewarded curiosity. If you were passionate about these sounds, there was a universe of great music waiting for you to discover it. Third-wave ska led back to 2 Tone and the Skatalites, plus all the incredible music that's come out of Jamaica since. Kids who flipped for swing might have gone back to Louis Prima and Cab Calloway and all the other men and women who moved the masses before rock 'n' roll.

Swing and ska encouraged young people to actively engage with music, not just sit on the sidelines. You didn't have to become a mod or a rude boy or fill your house with swanky mid-century furniture. Learning to tie a tie and wearing it while dancing yourself dehydrated at a ska show was enough. Even having the open-mindedness to let a little trombone into your life was something.

Regardless of whether '90s ska and swing fans stuck with these genres into the '00s, they learned from the Bosstones and Royal Crown Revue what it means to interact with pop culture on a deeper level. "Straight-up rock with a capital R doesn't ask anything of you," says Steve Perry of Cherry Poppin' Daddies. "But swing and ska do. They're kind of elitist in a way, because you can't just roll out of your bed and be into swing and ska. You have to figure it out."