

# life Music

## And the English Beat goes on

BY PETER JONES

**M**y dad told me a long time ago it's better to be a (expletive) has-been than a 'never-was-a,' says Dave Wakeling, original guitarist and singer for the English Beat.

During the punk and new wave heyday of the late 1970s and '80s, few would have predicted the genres would ever be the stuff of nostalgia.

British punk was reactionary, designed as much to dethrone tired Top 40 dinosaurs as it was to put Queen Elizabeth in her place. Longing for things past was not part of the punk culture.

New wave, an umbrella term for the associated music that followed, was marked by electronics, distorted vocals and oblique lyrics. The distant, almost futuristic pop set its own terms, having had little precedent in 1970s disco, country-rock or progressive jam tedium.

Okay, England's "mods" of the 1960s were a cultural precursor and the glam-rock of David Bowie and Gary Glitter arguably set an early musical stage, but bear with me.)

Now, lo and behold, new wave finds itself in the same condition as doo-wop and 1960s pop-rock. The package oldies tour, once a refuge for the Platters and Gary Puckett and the Union Gap, is now putting A Flock of Seagulls and Human League back to work. By this decade's end, PBS will have surely built a pledge-week around reuniting Haircut 100 or Missing Persons.

Better that, than the alternative, Wakeling figures. He, for one, is glad new wave has found new life... anywhere... even if it has become "old wave" in the quarter-century process.

"I'm still in awe of the fact that 25 years later, I can sing the songs and most of the people in the crowd know all the words. I sign all the records and people bring their 20-year-old sons and daughters to meet me because they grew up sick to death of my music," says Wakeling, who turns 50 next month.

"I went to see one of those Tamla-Motown reviews when I was a teenager and I certainly had no problem with the Four Tops being on the show with four other bands."

Wakeling and the current English Beat shared a bill with Devo and other 80s bands last summer. They play the Bluebird on their own this month.

Formed in Birmingham, England in 1979, the Beat (called English Beat in the US to avoid confusion with a since-forgotten Los Angeles entity) were shakers in the British ska revival of the late 70s and early 80s.

Ska was roots-ish 1950s Jamaican pop that had made its way into England's anarchic punk scene in much the same fashion that marijuana had been passed from black jazz musicians to white literary bo-

hemians in the '40s and '50s.

"Punk and reggae made an alliance, basically on the fact that most punks wouldn't let punks or Rastas in. So it was really like an association of out-laws," Wakeling explains. "That really turned into a new wave of ska... I think, quite by happenstance... because it turned out if you mix-up punk and reggae you get something that sounds quite similar to ska."

A little bit of Motown didn't hurt, either. The Beat's first hit in 1979 was an up-tempo cover of Smokey Robinson's "Tears of a Clown," a song whose circus-like instrumental hook was prime fodder for re-invention in quickened ska.

"Of all the songs we do, regardless of whether we're playing to punks or Rastas or students or old-age pensioners, 'Tears of a Clown' always goes down," Wakeling says.

Original, often oddball hits, many written by Wakeling, followed, including "Mirror in the Bathroom," "I Confess," "Stand Down, Margaret" (a dig at Maggie Thatcher that the BBC banned), and the sexual pun fest, "Save it For Later," a song whose lyrical hook requested, "Hold my hand while I come...to a decision on it."

The Who's Pete Townsend, a publicly confirmed bisexual, often winkingly performed it live in his '80s solo concerts.

"I was told that he thought it was my gay coming-out song, which it wasn't," Wakeling says. "He was going through a similar thing at the time, and so there was some sense it was connected to that. It was not actually a coming-out song. It was just a dirty high-school joke."

"Save it - comma - 'for later.' Ooh, dude, you said feller!"

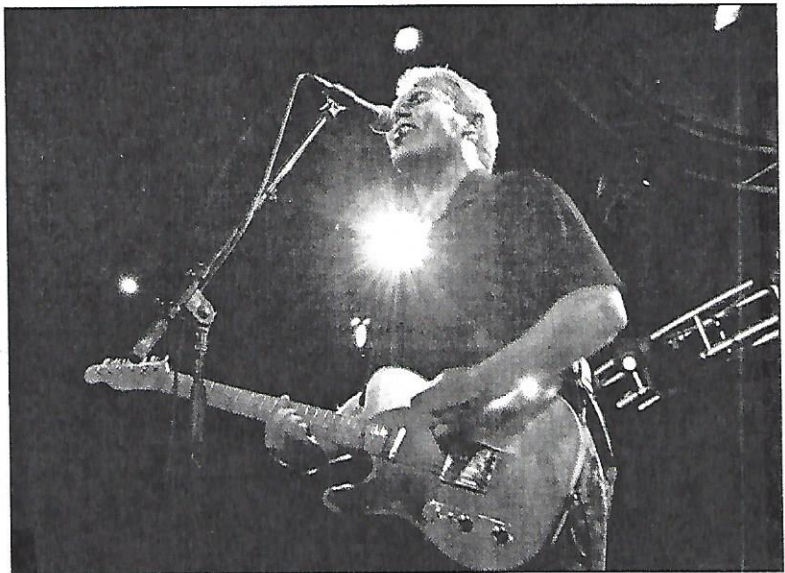
As Wakeling single-handedly cranked-out the hits, he noticed that some of his band mates were finding excuses to save all the work for later, much later, if at all.

"I was a terribly committed socialist at the time," he explains, "so I had absolutely insisted that we all get paid the same money, including publishing on the songs, regardless of what anyone had done in terms of writing."

"We were all sweating on stage together. Freeloading socialism did start to creep in because some people soon realized it really didn't matter what you did this week because the money was going to be the same on Friday anyway."

In 1983, the Beat crumbled in a capitalist revolution that saw half of the band resurface as Fine Young Cannibals; the other half, including Wakeling, formed General Public, a group that saw success with the hit, "Tenderness."

As for ska, it went the way of the Twist, until the 1990s and early 21st century when bands like Mighty Mighty Bosstones revived it again, with even more



DAVE WAKELING still fronts the English Beat.

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punk-derived energy.

Wakeling resuscitated the English Beat, itself, albeit with new members, adding General Public representation to the set list. He is now writing music for a new solo album and plans to record a new CD of acoustic versions of English Beat and General Public hits.

Although the new players in Wakeling's band do not benefit from the Beat's original socialist handbook, the group leader says he has not otherwise abandoned his politics.

"You have to have 25,000

brown babies die of malnutrition every day in order to make capitalism work," he surmises. "You can't be a millionaire unless someone on the other side of the world is dying for your privilege."

"I think Karl Marx said communism would never really work properly until it was in a post-capitalist system because you have to realize that we are all in the same boat together, whether we like it or not. You can't just decide you're in the same boat. You have to understand that we have no choice but to be in the same boat."

*The English Beat will perform Jan. 20 at the Bluebird Theatre. For more information, call 303-322-2308 or visit [thebeatuk.com](http://thebeatuk.com). Contact Peter Jones at [pjoneslifemusic@aol.com](mailto:pjoneslifemusic@aol.com).*