

REVIEWS

BOX SET

THE ENGLISH BEAT

*The Complete Beat*

[Shout! Factory]

The English Beat holds exalted status among fans who continue to cherish the late '70s British ska revival. During its all-too-brief career, the multi-ethnic ensemble churned out three brilliant albums that set the standard for their peers. The group hit the pavement running in 1979 with a flurry of frenetic, punk-tinged ska hits that were as sophisticated as they were fun. By 1983, just when it seemed poised to break big in America, the group called it quits. This five-CD box traces the English Beat's career in fine fashion. Three discs present the official studio albums, fleshed out with bonus tracks. Rounding out the set is a disc devoted to dub versions and extended mixes, and another that gathers live material from BBC radio sessions and a 1982 performance in Boston.

From start to finish, what emerges is a portrait of a band determined to keep evolving. Early tracks like a 1979 rendition of Smokey Robinson's "Tears of a Clown" gradually give way to ratcheted-down tempos and darker moods, then toward sophisticated pop. Latter-day material like 1982's "Save It for Later" and "I Confess" seemed to point toward a glorious future, but it was not to be. Supplementing the set is a photo-filled booklet featuring a lengthy essay chronicling the band's career and providing historical context. English Beat alumni went on to find post-breakup success in acts like Fine Young Cannibals and General Public, but those acts pale next to the shock and shimmer of the lightning captured in this box. —Russell Hall

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