



# What is it?

It wasn't Margaret Thatcher's tenure at Number 10 that sparked the sounds of UK ska and the 2 Tone label, but it was under Thatcherism's dark shadow that it flourished. The formation of its headline groups – The Specials, The Selecter and Madness – actually predate Mrs T getting into Downing Street (on 4 May 1979) but certainly her government's hardline policies helped turbo-charge the genre. Unemployment surged within the first year of her premiership as she waged war on the unions, and it was cities like Coventry that bore the brunt of Thatcher's iron fist, a state of affairs chronicled in The Specials' classic chart-topper *Ghost Town*.

Drawing from the upbeat Jamaican ska that had bled into British nightclubs a decade earlier, UK ska bands of the 70s and 80s blended those dancefloor rhythms with punk's raw urgency, resulting in an intoxicating mix of offbeat rhythms, horn stabs and lyrics that called out social injustice. The genre's signature label 2 Tone was formed in 1979 by The Specials' Jerry Dammers. It wasn't home to all the movement's groups (Madness were on Stiff, The Beat were on their own Go-Feet!), but it was an exclusively ska label, with even its logo reflecting the genre's multiracial ideals and sharp-suited aesthetic.

2 Tone Records didn't survive beyond the Thatcher era, but with the Labour Party in disarray following the Tories' 1979 win and the unions neutered, ska was in many ways the real opposition in 80s Britain.

# UK SKA

THE SOUND OF BRITAIN'S CITY STREETS IN THE EARLY 80s THAT MERGED POLITICALLY-CHARGED MESSAGES WITH JAMAICAN RHYTHMS...

STEVE O'BRIEN



# What they say

"I SUPPOSE I WAS TRYING TO PUT A BIT OF MY SOCIALIST WORLDVIEW ONTO IT ALL!"

**JERRY DAMMERS TALKING ABOUT THE SPECIALS' DEBUT ALBUM TO CLASSIC POP**

"WHEN WE PLAYED WITH THE SPECIALS AT THE NASHVILLE [IN LONDON], THERE WAS A QUEUE OF KIDS WHO LOOKED LIKE WE DID. I THOUGHT: 'FUCK ME. THERE'S A SCENE HAPPENING.'"

**SUGGS, AS QUOTED IN THE GUARDIAN**

## Essential artists



### ▲ MADNESS

The Nutty Boys from Camden – all-white but 2 Tone-adjacent after their debut single *The Prince* was released through the label. Suggs and co. turned ska into chart gold, with Prince Buster cover *One Step Beyond* kicking off a string of Top 10 hits. Happier than other ska groups to branch out into full-on pop (*Our House* and *Baggy Trousers* owed little to the Caribbean), they became the archetypal singles band, with their 1982 compilation album *Complete Madness* spending 99 weeks on the UK charts, peaking at No.1. They remain in action today and are still producing new material, with their 12th studio album *Theatre Of The Absurd Presents C'est La Vie* released in 2023.

### ◀ THE SPECIALS

Coventry's finest, formed by Jerry Dammers in 1977 as The Automatics before evolving into a seven-piece multiracial powerhouse. Fronted by Terry Hall's deadpan sneer, the group mixed Jamaican ska with punk attitude through tracks like *Gangsters*, *Too Much Too Young* and the intoxicatingly bleak *Ghost Town*, a song released while riots erupted across the country. The band split in 1981, with Hall, toaster Neville Staple and guitarist Lynval Golding becoming Fun Boy Three and Dammers and co. forming the spinoff outfit Special AKA. They reformed, without their gap-toothed founder, in 2008, releasing the album *Encore* in 2019. Sadly, Hall's death in 2022 put the final full stop on one of British ska's greatest bands.

### HONORARY MENTION: BAD MANNERS ▶

They may not have been taken as seriously as their more politically fuelled contemporaries, but Bad Manners' chart victories in the early years of the 80s deserve a nod. A rowdy, almost novelty act, Buster Bloodvessel's chrome dome and evacuation slide-sized tongue became as tied to the ska sound as Madness' pork pie hats, while songs like *Lip Up Fatty* and *Special Brew* (not to mention a raucous cover of *Can Can*) showed the genre's more frivolous side.



### ▲ THE BEAT

Birmingham's multiracial crew led by Ranking Roger and Dave Wakeling. The Beat (or The English Beat as they were known in North America) are fondly remembered for their cover of *Tears Of A Clown* as well as hits like *Hands Off... She's Mine*, *Mirror In The Bathroom* and *Can't Get Used To Losing You*. When they split in 1983, guitarist Andy Cox and bassist David Steele formed Fine Young Cannibals while Roger and Wakeling created General Public. In the 2000s both frontmen simultaneously led US and UK versions of The Beat. Sadly, Roger passed away in 2019 and his son Ranking Junior now carries on his legacy. Wakeling continues to tour and brings his Beat to these shores in October.



### ▲ THE SELECTER

Coventry comrades to The Specials, formed by Neol Davies and fronted by Pauline Black. Their eponymous instrumental appeared as the B-side to The Specials' *Gangsters* on 2 Tone's debut 7", and they were one of the genre's most successful outfits with Top 40 hits like *On My Radio*, *Three Minute Hero* and *Missing Words*. While the original lineup split too soon, Black played under the Selecter banner with Arthur 'Gaps' Hendrickson for many years until his death in 2024. Since then she has continued to keep the band's name active, now alongside founding drummer Charley 'Aitch' Bembridge, and her autobiography, *Black By Design: A 2-Tone Memoir*, is a must for any self-respecting rudeboy or girl.

## Essential albums

### THE SPECIALS THE SPECIALS (1979)



Produced by Elvis Costello, this bruiser of a debut is 2 Tone's blueprint: raw, kinetic and politically engaged. Mixing well-picked covers (*A Message To You Rudy*, *Do The Dog*, *Monkey Man* et al) with blistering originals (*Concrete Jungle*, *Too Much Too Young*, *Blank Expression*), it's a bold statement of intent, as much a punk/new wave album as a ska one.

### MADNESS ONE STEP BEYOND... (1979)



Madness' debut is the missing link between The Specials' politically-charged earnestness and Bad Manners' giddy hedonism. Though it kicks off with a Prince Buster cover, the rest is mostly Madness-originated, with highlights being the Mike Barson-penned *My Girl* and Suggs and Barson's irresistible *Night Boat To Cairo*.

### THE BEAT I JUST CAN'T STOP IT (1980)



Everything about The Beat's first album is ska-perfect, from the jagged black, white and pink sleeve art to its top-tier ska-pop tunes. *Mirror In The Bathroom* takes the crown, but there's so much more – like *Hands Off... She's Mine*, *Stand Down*, *Margaret* (guess who that's about) and the Andy Williams cover *Can't Get Used To Losing You*.

### THE SELECTER TOO MUCH PRESSURE (1980)



Recorded speedily over December 1979 to January 1980 at Coventry's Horizon Studios with producer Errol Ross, The Selecter's 13-track debut captures the band's live energy, featuring originals by guitarist Neol Davies alongside canny covers such as Justin Hinds' *Carry Go Bring Come* and Monty Norman's *James Bond Theme*.

## Essential songs

- The Specials – *Gangsters*
- The Bodysnatchers – *Let's Do Rock Steady*
- Madness – *One Step Beyond*
- The Beat – *Mirror In The Bathroom*
- The Selecter – *On My Radio*
- Bad Manners – *Lip Up Fatty*



## Further viewing

- *Dance Craze* (1981 documentary) ■