STREET SCENE

Immunity gets crowd on its feet with a reggae beat

STEPHANIE A. CASOLA

In the metro area, when you're talking reggae, you're talking about Immunity.

For the past six — almost seven years, Jonathan Pettus, Tom Varga, Bill Koggenhop, Tom Wall, and Tony Mitchell have been bringing crowds to their feet. Judging from the crowd that gathered at Shain Park in Birmingham on Sept. 2, Immunity has struck a nerve.

June Taylor McGregor, who organized the Birmingham concert, said Immunity was the perfect band to perform at the final concert of the "In the Park" summer series. She said the band's music serves as a kickoff of a new century, while maintaining the nostalgia of past years.

No patch of green grass could be seen as the audience arranged blankets and lawn chairs before the stage. From toe-tapping two-year-olds to senior citizens who spontaneously hopped from their seats to line-dance to tunes, Immunity got the crowd moving.

Connecting with their fans

"They're great," said 12-year-old Mike Sanders of Farmington Hills who liked the feeling of the music. "The singer walked around the grass. Sanders was impressed by the way Pettus walked among the crowd, singing and dancing with audience members. Sanders' friend, 14-year-old Joe Marks, also of Farmington Hills, said it was a great idea to come down and see the band. Both boys showed their appreciation by talking to some of the musicians between sets.

Playing tunes like "Red Red Wine," "Brown-eyed Girl," and "No Woman, No Cry," Immunity combined music that is widely appreciated with a style that is all their own. What other reggae based band adds a harmonica or funky bass line to a song just because they can?

The "unexpected" might be the band's specialty. Just ask Wall, Immunity's lead guitarist who grew up in Birmingham, why he loves playing music? He'll tell you it's the quest to become teen idols! But seriously, he said the love of music keeps the band together. Besides, what other career would allow him to wear leopard spotted pants, with a matching hat (complete with ears) and a pink tie-dyed shirt?

Reggae rock, Detroit style

Like its members, Immunity emits a style like no other.

Varga, rhythm guitarist, said Immunity is not about traditional reggae. Mixing originals like the powerful "Rhythm of the Heart" and Bob Marley covers like "So Much Trouble in the World," the band has established its own niche — reggae rock, Detroit style.

Seth Chafetz, a sponsor of the "In the Park" series and Birmingham City Commission candidate, said he wouldn't miss the show. He's not only a fan of reggae, he's also a fan of Jonathan Pettus, he said.

Pettus was in good spirits as he wandered among the crowd and spoke to fans. "I love them all," he said, smiling "It's wonderful."

Bill Koggenhop, who called the day after the show, agreed. "Audiences have been really cool," he said. "People really enjoy our music."

For a band that completed 22 gigs in the month of July alone, he seems to be right on target. Immunity has recently opened for such bands as The Beach Boys and Mark Farhner, the first musical guests at the 1999 Michigan State Fair. Of the band's music Koggenhop said: "We just sort of jam along. We're relaxed ourselves. Reggae kind of fits."

stirring it up

The music suits all ages. Koggenhop said the band stirs up a reggae beat in a way that's appealing to kids and adults. He used their version of "Brown Eyed Girl" as an example of a song that appeals to many. They shoot from the Van Morrison hit to "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," made famous in Disney's "The Lion King," and back, appealing to a wide audience. The band has even started adding Latin rhythms to songs like "Freedom," in an effort to ride the wave made popular by artists like Ricky Martin. "We've got all these little weapons," said Koggenhop.

But Immunity is looking ahead. A new CD is in the works, said Varga, and should be available before Christmas. Their debut, "Immunity Live," has sold more than 1,000 copies and was a hot item among adults and youngsters at the Shain Park performance. Several copies were distributed to eager fans.

Rockin' reggae: *Tony Mitchell, (back row, left) Tom Varga, Bill Koggenhop, Tom Wall and (front row) Jonathan Pettus are Immunity, a local reggae sensation.*

Immunity's will be performing 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Friday, Sept. 17 at Rochester Mills Brewery, 400 Water Street in downtown Rochester. Call (248) 650-5080 for more information.

Stephanie Angelyn Casola writes about popular music for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. She can be reached at (734) 953-2130 or e-mail at scasola@ oe. homecomm. net To send a fax, dial (734) 691-7279.

Family Values return to town in a 'Crystal'lized form

BY STEPHANIE ANGELYN CASOLA
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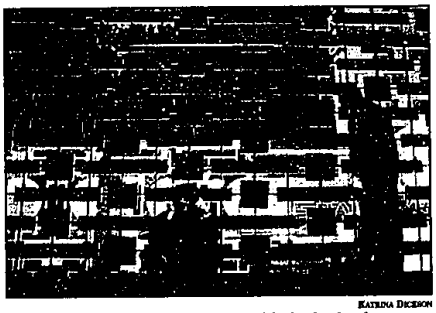
Ask Ken Jordan how he describes The Crystal Method sound and he'll tell you simply, "We sound like us."

In a telephone interview from his California home, Jordan — one half of The Crystal Method — was ready to join the 1999 Family Values Tour and bring audiences a taste of electronica like they might never have seen before. The tour makes its second stop at The Palace of Auburn Hills on Wednesday Sept. 22.

"I think we'll be playing to an audience of people that might not have ever seen our show," said Jordan in a sleepy-sounding voice, "a lot of people we feel would be interested in us. I think they'll be surprised at how we're not that much different from a regular rock act."

But The Crystal Method is anything but a regular rock act.

Limp Bizkit



KATRINA DICKSON

Method for success: *The Crystal Method, also known as Scott Kirkland (left) and Ken Jordan, are spreading Family Values this year on tour with Limp Bizkit.*

Together since 1993, the duo — which also features Scott Kirkland — arose from the atmospheric electronic underground of Los Angeles, made a name for themselves as deejays, and took that sound to the streets. In 1997 the band gained momentum by releasing its Outpost Recordings debut, "Vegas," which featured the duo's danceable electronica peppered by funk, rock and hip-hop beats.

Two years later, Jordan said he hopes audiences will "learn to appreciate the music a little more" after having the Family Values exposure. The Crystal Method will join Filter on this tour, an industrial rock band they've successfully collaborated with in the past. Filter and Crystal Method worked on "(Can't You) Trip Like I Do," for the soundtrack to the film "Spawn."

"It was great actually," said Jordan. "It was the first big video we had done, which was kinda fun. But working on the song, I was surprised to see Filter working the same way we do in the studio."

Four days and one hit song later, the collaboration proved successful. Jordan, a fan of Filter's music, said touring with them will be "a lot of fun."

Filter missed a scheduled telephone interview with the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers while on tour in Europe.

For a band credited for carrying American-made electronica into the mainstream of popular music, The Crystal Method hasn't looked back. Jordan commented on the current status of techno music.

"It's more accepted," he said. "It's not treated as something so weird or strange. Fatboy Slim and the Chemical Brothers have had a lot more success. People are into it."

So into it that a band like The Crystal Method can accompany headliners like Limp Bizkit — whose single "Nookie" hit number three on Billboard's Modern Rock Charts for the week of Sept. 11 — on a tour that's sure to be talked about on high school and college campuses across the country this fall.

"The good music, that's done really good, people listen (to) with open ears," said Jordan.

What will those open ears hear from Jordan and Kirkland? If all goes as planned, a new album should be released early next year.

"I think our sound will continue to evolve. I think it will be better than 'Vegas,' but you'll still be able to recognize it," Jordan said. Listen for a couple new, still un-named, tracks during The Crystal Method's set on the Family Views Tour.

The Family Values Tour, featuring Limp Bizkit, Filter, DMX and The Crystal Method heads into town 7 p.m. Wednesday, Sept. 22 at The Palace of Auburn Hills. Tickets are $35. Call (248) 377-0100 or (248) 645-6666. Buy tickets online at www.ticketmaster.com.

DANCE

'JazzTrain' moves beyond preconceptions

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
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Donald Byrd is more than an ambitious choreographer with a plan to fuse the respective heritages of jazz and dance. He's on a mission.

In "JazzTrain," his latest incantatory dance venture, Byrd combines several influences into a vibrantly acrobatic program inspired by the music of Max Roach, Vernon Reid and Geri Allen.

"JazzTrain," which will be performed through Sunday at the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts, is intended to compel audiences to "think about what is an American."

That means audiences should expect to reflect on what is arguably the most American of art forms – jazz. At least that's what Byrd has in mind.

Byrd contends that jazz represents a blend of European and African-American traditions, and a melting pot of sounds analogous to the assimilation of subcultures into a broader American culture.

"I want 'JazzTrain' to be like Balanchine's Stravinky and the Ravel Festivals at City Ballet," he said. The work, which has received a long list of impressive reviews, was first performed as a work in progress in the fall of 1997.

Fusion of music and dance: *Donald Bryd's "JazzTrain" features dance performed to compositions from acclaimed jazz musicians.*

"This isn't a thorough explanation of jazz history," said Byrd. "It's a way to introduce audiences to two art forms working together."

And like his previous work, "JazzTrain" is high-energy performance that pushes the boundaries of dance and aesthetics. (Byrd is perhaps best known to local audiences as the creative force behind "The Harlem Nutcracker" and prolific choreographer for Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre.)

"People have expectations about what jazz is," said Byrd. "I've set out to create an image that's appropriate for the music, not the genre."

Each of the three acts in "JazzTrain" features the distinctive jazz of legendary drummer Roach, funk/punk/rock guitarist Reid and Allen, one of most sought-after piano players on the scene.

The first act is torn from the hot beats of the urban streets. Dancers emerge and fade from the stage with frenetic precision. Sculptural configurations offer a pause between sensual gestures that remind audiences that the combination of jazz and dance is a poetically expressive act of foreplay.

What: "Jazz Train," a theatrical fusion of music and dance, choreographed by Donald Byrd
When: 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday
Where: Music Hall, 350 Madison, Detroit (just off the Madison Exit from I-375)
Tickets: $30-$40. Call (313) 963-2366

In act two, Byrd wrings from Reid's haunting score a mythic reference to the Garden of Eden. Dancers wear African clothes in what unfolds as a dance of friendship and love.

The final section broadens into a more abstract, spontaneous expression that includes mating rituals and a reminder that jazz is the ultimate soundtrack when moving with a cool confidence.

"There's this notion that because I'm black I know what jazz is all about," said Byrd. "I realize that I didn't know as much as I thought about jazz.

"The music should not be alienating, but should be an eye-opener."