

Reggae 'comes from the soul'

By WALLY PATRICK
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ASK SINGER-GUITARIST Junior Smoots to describe reggae and he'll answer the way many blues artists describe their music.

"It's roots music," Smoots says. "It comes from the soul. It's about society — the people and the problems."

Smoots, Wall Township, heads the six-piece group Junior Smoots and the Disturbers, the most prominent — if not the only — Shore area rock band devoted to Jamaican music.

The group performs every Wednesday at midnight on "Reggae Wednesdays" at The Fast Lane, Fourth Avenue, Asbury Park. Admission is \$2.

On Saturday, the band will participate in the fourth annual Monmouth Association for Retarded Citizens benefit concert, from noon to 7 p.m. at Bodman Park, Cooper Road, Middletown Township.

Also appearing will be Sonny Kenn and the Wild Ideas, Tom Brennan and Friends and WJLK disc jockey Cande, who will serve as emcee. A \$3 donation is requested.

SMOOTS' PARTICIPATION in the benefit befits the spirit of reggae, he said.

"It's a good opportunity to help people. Reggae is music about people and for people. It's about the oppressed and this is a chance to help some of those people," he said.

Smoots (not his original name) launched The Disturbers about a year ago, attracting musicians through classified ads. He previously played in a series of conventional rock bands.

"I had been writing some stuff in reggae and ska, which I had been listening to for a long time. I wanted to try starting a group in New York, but some friends of mine told me I should try it down here first."

After a dismal debut (Smoots said only five people attended the band's first performance), the group began to build a following with its combination of reggae, rock and ska.



Reggae band Junior Smoots and the Disturbers, which will play in a benefit concert for retarded citizens Saturday, includes, from left, Smoots, Paul Roberts, Judy Joots, Kenny Douyotas, Kevin Ward and Vito.

"SKA IS THE forerunner of reggae. It's the music that was happening in Jamaica from about 1963 to 1967," Smoots said. "It's characterized by a steady upbeat. It's a bit faster, more uptempo than reggae."

Some critics contend — as with the blues — that true reggae can be played only by blacks. But Smoots, who is white, disagrees.

"It's just a matter of feeling it. You have to feel it to play it," he said.

"It's great dance music, but a lot of people don't know how to dance to it. You just slow down and groove — skankin' is what they call it."

On a typical night, The Disturbers perform original material and reggae hits such as Toots and the Maytalls' "Pressure Drop," Peter Tosh's "I'm Dangerous" and Bob Marley's "Get Up, Stand Up."

It was Marley who made reggae popular among rock audiences, but Smoots said several American pop hits featured the reggae sound even before Marley became well known.

Smoots cited Millie Small's early '60s single 'My Boy Lollipop' and Desmond Dekker's 'The Israelites' as two prime examples.

"The Israelites' — nobody knew what that song was when they first heard it," he said.

Though a few more reggae hits came along, most Jamaican acts encountered frustration bidding for broad commercial acceptance in the '70s.

"Radio stations wouldn't play reggae," Smoots said. "And everyone's musical taste is dictated by what they hear on the radio. That's why you walk around singing McDonalds commercials."

Only Marley was able to break through the limited-airplay barrier and achieve

major stardom in the United States.

"Many people know Bob Marley's music but they don't even know who Toots and the Maytalls are. They've been recording since Marley started," Smoots said.

The spiritual element of reggae is one of its prime attractions, said Smoots, who lived for a while in a Buddhist monastery in New York.

"I WAS ALWAYS inclined to stuff that had roots and spiritual value. With reggae, the term that is used is 'one love' or 'one people.' That's what the music is all about. You start feeling it and it becomes like a religious thing."

The present Smoots lineup has been together since January. It includes singer Judy Joots, drummer Ken Douyotas and saxophonist Vito, all of whom live with Smoots at the "Smoots House" in Wall Township.

Guitarist Kevin Ward, Ocean Grove, and bass player Paul Roberts, Sea Bright, complete the group.

Smoots said the band's original material combines reggae, ska, calypso and modern African elements.

THE GROUP ALSO performs ska material by groups like The English Beat and The Selecter and reggae cover versions of pop tunes such as Johnny Rivers' "Secret Agent Man" and the Latin-flavored instrumental hit "Tequila."

Can any song be reworked into a reggae number?

"It's possible," Smoots said. "Toots and the Maytalls did a version of 'Country Roads,' by John Denver, which was a real wimpy song originally. But Toots really put some guts into it."

Smoots hopes to work more original music into the group's act and increase the popularity of reggae in the area.