

MUSIC NOTES

Smoots, Joots, roots

By JON HEALEY

ASBURY PARK — What are roots, Junior Smoots?

The former construction worker/Buddhist monk/blues guitarist paces back and forth across the tiny Fast Lane dressing room, then speaks.

"It's people's music. It's saying something. It's the music of rebellion. It's the music of what's happening." It's delightful, it's delicious, it's delovely ...

What it is, mon, is reggae, a rare enough sound on the Jersey Shore.

Sired by a classified ad, Junior Smoots and the Disturbers are a six-member ensemble that plays a blend of reggae, ska, and modern African tunes, mostly penned by other artists (but Smoots says he's working on that).

The band started forming last June, according to Smoots, but did not jell until January, and only recently began touring the bar circuit.

The most immediately appealing aspect of the band is the contrast it offers to the typical shore fare. Reggae music is built on a fundamentally different foundation from rock'n'roll — with the emphasis on the upbeat, not the downbeat. And Junior Smoots and the Disturbers offer a convincing rendition of reggae, with magnetic rhythm and appealing, energetic melodies.

"Reggae music is just fun, happy music," guitarist Kevin Ward of Ocean Grove says. Having spent the past few years in blues and heavy metals bands, Ward appreciates the move to the more breezy Disturbers.



"I don't feel I have to prove myself to every other guitarist in the room any more," Ward said.

Still, Smoots sees something deeper in his craft, the "roots."

"It's about people, it's for people. The songs are about brotherhood ... it's very spiritual music," Smoots says. The sound of something deep inside that is shared — this is roots music, right Smoots?

"It's music that comes from the soul," Smoots says.

And music with a message, emphasizes vocalist Judy Joots of Belmar. It's a message of freedom, of "one love," as Smoots says, of one people. And that message clashes with the ruling mentality, according to Joots.

"A lot of people aren't even aware of how political (the music) is. It isn't just island music," Joots says.

The band members seem to have absorbed that message, just as they have gotten into the reggae "groove." According to Smoots, the various band members started out "a little bit" interested in reggae, but that was not enough. "They just had to get totally into it ... You have to have the feeling. It's a good-feeling groove."

Saxophonist Vito (no, that's not his real name, either) went from classical clarinet music to Springsteen covers before finding his reggae roots.

"I was fed up with every other type of music," Vito says of his conversion, adding that reggae is "like, the most creative thing I can do."

Smoots, Joots, Vito and Ward are complemented by drummer Ken Douyotas of Neptune and bassist Paul Roberts of Sea Bright, who form an energetic, convincing reggae rhythm section. And yes, you can dance to reggae.

"We play dancing music," Smoots says, "but a lot of people around here might not know how to dance to reggae, or they might not feel comfortable." In fact, according to Joots, some people feel threatened by the unfamiliar beat.

So how DO you dance to reggae?

"Close your eyes and feel the beat," Ward advises, "and if anybody makes fun of you, just tell Junior."