

A Little Reggae in Little Rock, Published in “Sync” Magazine, Little Rock, Arkansas

From the opening strains of the Bob Marley classic “Stir it Up” I knew we were in for a treat. My friends and I, along with my visiting mother, decided to try Rum and Reggae night at The After Thought, located at 2721 Kavanaugh in the Hillcrest area of Little Rock, with entertainment featuring steel drum player Darril “Harp” Edwards and friends.

The club was decorated in tropical splendor, with colorful plastic leis on each table and a grass curtain hanging at the entry. The bartender was also in character for the evening in a multicolored, crocheted Rasta tam, complete with instant dreadlocks. The menu featured six specialty rum drinks with flavorful names such as Dark & Stormy Night, Miami Sunrise and Tropical Storm, and offered several mouth-watering appetizers.

We were soon swaying in our seats to an island beat as Edwards skillfully played a pair of gleaming steel drums to perfection, backed up by Carl Mouton on keyboard, Darrell Johnson on drums and Gerald Johnson on saxophone. The group appeared relaxed and at ease, performing song after song seamlessly, individual instruments and vocal harmonies blending smoothly to produce a light hearted, spirit-lifting sound as refreshing as an island breeze.

A woman at the table adjacent to ours shared that this was her first visit to the club. “I’ve wanted to come here for a long time, and finally convinced my husband,” she confided. “We were very pleased to find that the music tonight is a genre we both enjoy, and I really like the atmosphere.”

The crowd ranged in age from college students to baby boomers, with a sprinkling of senior citizens front and center on the edge of the dance floor. Some were adventurous enough to brave the tight quarters and move to the reggae beat on the small dance floor, while several others grooved to the islands-inspired tunes from the comfort of their chairs. Edwards kept the pace lively with his energetic stylings, and master saxophonist Gerald Johnson wowed us with expertly executed solos on numbers like Marley’s “No Woman, No Cry” and Santana’s “Oye, Como Va”.

To my surprise, I discovered later this was the first time the four had ever played together, and they did so without the benefit of a rehearsal. The fluidity of their combined performances belied a lack of practice, and proved that when you get a group of professionals together who love what they do, everyone walks away happy.

New to the Little Rock music scene, Edwards has only been in town four short months. His musical career began at the age of 14 when a friend took him to a pan yard in his home of Trinidad & Tobago, where he had his first real exposure to the national instrument of this island nation, the steel pan. When asked if he had any career dreams Edwards said he would like to play with some of his musical influences such as Stevie Wonder, George Benson, and Usher.

“To be able to play with great musicians such as these would prove to me that the steel drum had gained the proper respect in the music world,” he stated passionately. Edwards played with equal amounts of passion and skill, prompting my elderly mother to declare “They really get a lot of music out of those four guys, and Darril is tearing it up on the drums!” Couldn’t have said it better myself, Mom.

Management tells me that “Harp” and the others can often be found at the Afterthought for Tuesday night jam, a weekly event that often sees as many as a dozen musicians and singers from surrounding areas drop by over the course of the evening for some of the best impromptu music you’ll hear anywhere. Music starts at 8:00 and there is no cover.

This “trip to the islands” was a welcome break from the work week, an extremely enjoyable way to gain a little relief from the heat and humidity of summer in Little Rock and celebrate Reggae music. I left the club relaxed and happy, with the lyrics of Bob Marley’s song “Three Little Birds” repeating in my mind...“Every little thing gonna be alright.”