

VIRGIN ISLANDS REGGAE

'Cruz'ial Roots Music

by Daniel Frankston
All photos by Mark Siebert

It has often been said that true roots reggae music must originate in Jamaica. While "Yard" still remains the capitol of the reggae industry, over the past several years the sounds of roots music emanating from three islands that comprise the U.S. Virgin Islands – St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John – have risen in meteoric proportions.

Reggae from the Virgin Islands is unlike any other form of music. Massive roots bass lines are typically merged onto one drop drum rhythms and then injected with a heavy dose of bubbling from the keyboards to form a distinct "Cruzial" sound. Though most of the singers and musicians hail from St. Croix, some come from the neighboring islands of St. Thomas and St. John. Others have journeyed to distant places, yet the Cruzial vibe still permeates through their music.

Roots music from the Virgin Islands is not a new phenomenon. Reggae bands such as Midnite and Inner Visions have been in existence since the '80s, though it is only in recent years that Cruzial music has gained a large international following. The fruits of this musical eruption are revealed in the scores of roots albums that have been released in the past few years. The streets of St. Croix are teeming with conscious new roots artists just waiting for their time to blossom. V.I. reggae has arrived!!!

Chanters clearly dominate St. Croix's musical scene. This style of singing is personified by younger DJs pelting out fire-brand lyrics at break-neck speed. With pure conscious lyrics dealing with sufferation, social injustice and other real life issues, it's clearly the people's music. The female singers of the Virgin Islands are unrivaled. Whether it's hypnotic and tantalizing vocals from Dezarie, powerful toasting from Sistah Joyce or Mada Nile, these empresses demonstrate that the women of St. Croix take a back seat to no one.

In 2002, Midnite became the very first band to trod to the West Coast to bring the message of Rastafari to the people in attendance at the Bob Marley Day Festival in San Diego. Although the band spent some six years living in relative anonymity in Washington, D.C. during the mid-90s, their 2002 San Diego performance seems to have been a turning point that propelled the band to a higher level. In just a few short years, Midnite has transformed from an obscure, unknown band to become one of California's top-drawing reggae bands. Midnite has performed at all the big California reggae festivals including the Sierra Nevada World Music Festival, Reggae on the River, Earthdance and Reggae in the Park. In 2004, Midnite was credited with having 10 of the 25 top-selling reggae albums for the year by Ernie B's, the U.S.'s largest reggae distributor.

The popularity of Midnite has opened a floodgate of opportunity for a slew of other Virgin Islands' artists. 2005 saw V.I. artists like Dezarie, Batch, Ras Attitude, Bambu Station and I Grade touring throughout the United States. In addition to touring on their own, Bambu Station brought together artists like Pressure, Lady Passion, Ras Bumpa and Black Culture to form a "Talkin Roots" package that exposed



Cramer's Park Beach - St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands



Cruzian Christmas Children's Parade



Setting the Stage for Winter Reggae in Paradise



Sundown at Grassy Point - East end of St. Croix



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Mada Nile - Live at Winter Reggae in Paradise



Ron Benjamin and sons - Live at Winter Reggae in Paradise



Pressure - Live at Sierra Nevada World Music Festival



Dezarie - Backstage at San Francisco's Ragga Muffins Festival

many people to the music of St. Croix for the first time. Similarly, I Grade Records artists like Army, NiyoRah, Ancient King and Abja came united for an I Grade Showcase tour. Last year, the highlight of the 12th annual Sierra Nevada World Music Festival was a "Virgin Islands Roots Eruption" that featured nearly eight hours of roots music from St. Croix.

In January, I had the opportunity to make my first sojourn to St. Croix for the Winter Reggae in Paradise festival. For days before the concert, this normally sleepy island was abuzz with activities celebrating Cruzian Christmas. Music could be heard everywhere and the streets were packed as locals lined King Street to see both the Children's Parade as well as an adult parade the following day.

St. Croix is more peaceful than other Caribbean islands I have visited, with hustling being virtually non-existent. As I walked along the streets of St. Croix, I was overcome by a sense of familiarity. Cruzians are very warm people, greeting everyone they meet with a friendly look and a smile. I felt a certain closeness to people I had never met before.

Headlining the first annual Winter Reggae in Paradise was Ronnie Benjamin, Sr., the father of Midnite's Vaughn and Ron Benjamin. More than 20 St. Croix singers graced the stage that night with over nine hours of conscious roots music. It was a blessing to witness the thousands of Cruzians along the beach of Cramer's Park soaking in the Rasta vibes.

The Virgin Islands' roots eruption is starting to take root throughout the world too. Boston-based Natural Vibes has just released *Itinual Jah*, a various-artist compilation album. Zion High Productions has teamed up with Ras Attitude to release *Holding Firm*. Lustre Kings has included NiyoRah, Ras Attitude and Vaughn Benjamin on their latest riddem album, and be on the lookout for a swarm of V.I. artists to be released in France under the label V.I. Connection. Make no mistake: though the Virgin Islands may be small in size, on the musical scene, BIG things a gwan! ♡

Daniel Frankston's musical roots began 30 years ago, first as a DJ on a local radio station, then later working in reggae distribution. For over seven years, Daniel has been operating Ireggae.com where his weekly roots broadcasts may be heard along with dozens of artist interviews and a massive sound station. Last year saw the launching of Vireggae.com, the internet's premier website livicated to the Virgin Islands' reggae.



View of Frederiksted Harbour from the Fish Market