

Rootin' Out the Sounds of Reggae

The Itals' Keith Porter shares the love.

During the '80s, as the rugged urban style of dancehall reggae cropped up around Jamaica, the Itals continued to champion the roots reggae sound they had helped to create decades earlier. The band got their start in the late 1960s when friends Alvin "Keith" Porter and Ronnie Davis, then known as the Westmorelites (named after Jamaica's Westmoreland parish), recorded the hit single "Hitey Titey" for Clement "Coxsone" Dodds' esteemed Studio One label. Porter and Davis crossed paths again around 1975 and recorded their classic "Ina Dis Ya Time" as the Itals, taking their name from the Jamaican patois word meaning pure and unprocessed.

Recognized as one of reggae's premier "harmony groups," the Itals line-up has fluctuated through the years, with several different harmony singers backing Keith Porter. The diverse seaside community of Westmoreland, where Porter grew up, greatly influenced his laid-back singing style and the righteous outlook on life often described in the Itals' music. In contrast to the current of violence and sexism that runs through some of dancehall's most popular tunes, the Itals' roots reggae sound remains to this day focused on positivity and harmony. Before a recent sound check in New York, I had the chance to catch up with Porter by phone and pick his brain on the value of roots reggae today.

What kind of place does roots reggae have in today's popular Jamaican music scene? Do you think that there is more of a demand for roots elsewhere in the world?

I tell you, with roots music people get confused. Without the roots there would never have been any dancehall. What's going on in Jamaica, people try to take it and change it into something. Reggae music is being played all over the world, every corner of the world.

Is there any way for dancehall to undergo a roots Renaissance? Like a return to roots and positivity in the music?

It will always be the people. The media in the scene is being bought out by a lot of big organizations and competing firms and they don't want to promote reggae music because they're afraid of what reggae music can do: turn the people into one goodness. It's the way they shape it and sell it. Itals music will always be the kind of music you can take



The Itals
(Keith Porter & David Isaacs)
9 pm Wed., 8/3
WOW Hall, \$13 adv./\$15 dos.

home to your family or take home to your friends. 'Cause it's consciousness.

Can you tell me a little bit about Rastafarianism and what kind of role Rastas, through the medium of reggae music, can play in certain political climates?

There's one time Rastas couldn't even walk the street. The role that Rasta can do now is be true to yourself and be true to the people.

Tell me about your affinity for Eugene.

Eugene is one of the places I love. I love Eugene. I love the respect we get from people. People turn out for reggae music: feel the vibes, share the love.

Tell me about life in Westmoreland and coming up in a rural area like that away from the city. What kind of culture surrounded the people in their working class way of life and in your own words, how did that nurture the roots sound?

Where I come from there's a whole lot of mixture, it was one of the biggest seaport towns. So we have a lot of mixture of a lot of different cultures. We have Chinese, Germans, Africans, Indians, French, Cuban. Where I come from we sure loved everybody no matter where they come from. **EW**

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