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Empire Rooks is set to return to the stage with a revamped lineup this Friday at the Monopole. Photo provided

## BRINGING THAT GROOVE

By Josh Miner

WITH WINTER QUICKLY FADING, Empire Rooks is set to bring even more heat as they return to the Monopole stage this Friday for a marathon show, providing late-night dance grooves with their unique blend of soul, funk and reggae.

Empire Rooks exists in a world where funk and soul from the United States first started seeping into Caribbean music — influencing artists in a time before Bob Marley-style reggae would become the standard sound the islands are now known for. After a long, cold winter and nearly a year hiatus, Empire Rooks is excited to spread those warm island sounds with a fresh, new lineup.

Having been a student of Caribbean literature at SUNY Plattsburgh, front man Jamse Ward is no stranger to the islands' unique sound and charm. Ward was also a member of the local reggae band Slow Natives from 2006 to 2009, where he played bass until the group disbanded. He then went on to form Eat, Sleep, Funk! with his fellow Slow Natives bandmate, guitarist Shane Parrotte. His goal with Empire Rooks is to create that same kind of feel-good vibe for the audience but with a fresh twist.

As a result, the songbook is comprised of "smile tracks." These include some of the best-known songs from Rick James, Prince and James Brown. Despite covering famous artists like those, the vibe they really try to emulate is that of the unknown musicians who backed these kinds of performers.

"It's not really so much the main artists, but I would say that Franz [Pope] and I are mostly influenced by the original songwriters and backing bands of the studios at that time," Ward says, "all of these really great singers and performers that ended up taking that same backing band or the same couple backing bands."

Empire Rooks focuses on the sound these musicians were creating, and in doing so, they honor the true musicianship behind many of the hits known the world over.

"If you look at the history of reggae music, they were listening to airwaves from Florida; they were hearing James Brown; they were hearing Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding — all those guys that were coming out in the early to mid-60s," Ward explains, adding that the musicians of the era tried to incorporate this soulful, expressive sound in their own musical endeavors. "We are trying to capture that moment in time prior to reggae fully taking over."

It was right around 1962 to 1963 when this sound was really at its peak and when it began to morph into what we now think of as reggae, says Ward. "When you get into that soul, chunky analog-gear style sound, you really get to the crux of what [they call] the 'dirty reggae sound.'

Again, it's very well informed. It's not so much trying to play roots reggae music, but it's a mix between that soul style [and reggae]."

This dirty reggae sound is something they strive for in their shows, loosening up the crowd with relentless life and energy, while at the same time keeping the music tight.

What sets the band apart, however, is the diverse musical backgrounds of the members, with everyone bringing something unique to the table. While Ward is on lead vocals and rhythm guitar, every member contributes to the vocals as well. Steve Miller plays lead guitar with Pope on bass, Armand Langevin on saxophone and Josue De Luna on percussion. Sri Lankan native Vihan Wickramasinghe is on organ/keyboard, and Japanese students Koyu Susaki and Riku Suda are on drums and trumpet, respectively.

The group represents several different cultures, with the band serving as a musical melting pot of sorts, says Ward. "Josue is into jam-funk; that's his forte. Koyu loves a lot of J-Pop, Japanese Pop. Riku is classically trained. [He] plays classical, and he likes J-Pop. He knows ska. Vihan [...] is classical and jazz."

In addition to Pope, whose musical influence is a mix between metal, blues and jazz, and Langevin, who is mostly a jazz and ska-style player, the band includes a wide-ranging swath of musical inspiration.

The group has nearly a dozen originals ready to record, including the energetic *Stay*, whose rhythms are set to blend effortlessly with the covers they play now. While they had tracked some of these songs with previous members, they are now looking to re-record the music with their new lineup.

While songs like *Stay* give each member of the band a chance to stretch their legs, their intent isn't to distort the covers in any way. In fact, their mission is to stay as true as possible to the original and interpret it as they might have.

"The point is to respect how the originators of the music came out with it. So, in a sense, it's kind of like playing roots music as it was, American roots style," Ward explains. "We put a couple elements into [some] of the tracks just to maintain that kind of solidified, respected dance groove."

They'll bring that groove when they play their first show in nearly a year this Friday. Empire Rooks is sure to help audiences kick those winter blues as they share their funky, dirty reggae for an extended four-hour performance.

*Empire Rooks will perform Friday, March 22 at Monopole from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. For more information, visit [facebook.com/empirerooks](http://facebook.com/empirerooks).*