

Elvis White brings soca style to LCC

Septet fuses island dance-hall music, pop, R&B

By Mike Hughes
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This was sort of a generation gap in reverse.

The son liked the sounds of his roots, shimmering with island and African influences. The mom preferred Elvis Presley.

"My mother loved Elvis — she still does," said Elvis White, the headliner at Saturday's annual Caribbean Festival. "She has the records, the pictures, the Elvis teddy bears."

She also gave her son the Elvis name. Then he went in a different direction.

White sings in the soca style, merging island dance-hall music with rhythm-and-blues, pop and more. He's caught on quickly.

"When I heard him, I said, 'We've got to get him now; next year at this time, we won't be able to afford him,'" said Rootsmon Bird, who helps organize the festival.

White is already getting international attention. His record company cites key quotes:

► From Wyclef Jean, of Fugees fame: "This feels like the Elvis Movement. It's like Elvis is the Godfather."

► From Richard Branson, the British billionaire of Virgin (records, airlines, stores) fame: "The world is about to experience one of the true musical gems of the Caribbean."

These guys knew him first-



Courtesy photo

Ensemble: Although the band bears his name, Elvis White (center) is joined by: Gregory Hogan (left), keyboard and musical director; Shekera Wheatley (right), singer; and Toro George, singer. The band is backed by guitar, bass and drums, too.

hand. White's band played at Branson's private island; they opened for the Fugees on a nine-concert tour.

"Wyclef Jean would come to our show every day," White said. "He would hang out in our dressing room. There was a family feeling."

It was heady stuff for a guy from an island that almost disappeared.

White grew up in Montserrat, a small (11-mile-long) and moun-

tainous spot. It once had 13,000 people, but many left after a 1995 volcano eruption.

Before that, White says, it was a great place to grow up and to hear music. "If there was a concert, I would try to sneak out at night."

This little spot was the home of Alphonus Cassell, better known as The Mighty Arrow. His "Hot, Hot, Hot" became an international hit.

Cassell saw the teenaged

White playing in local hotels and invited him on tour as an opening act.

"That was an incredible experience," White said. "I saw how he was able to hook a crowd."

Later, White moved to the British Virgin Islands, where he played music by night and worked at an airport by day. In the day job, he often saw record producer Terry Johnson.

"He asked me where was a good place to hear music that

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Elvis White

night," White said.

He pointed Johnson toward his own show and a link was formed. Today, White lives in Atlanta, home of Johnson's label, 17.20 Records.

The band he's formed also bears the name Elvis White. White is one of three singers (two male, one female), backed by guitar, bass, drums and keyboards.

"Most of the others have nine or 10 pieces," he said of soca bands. "As a seven-piece unit, we're able to travel to a lot of places."

One performance even drew some national TV time. The band did pregame and halftime shows for a Miami Heat home game in the basketball playoffs.

The only trick that night was keeping it brief.

"In the Caribbean, we'll play for three, four hours non-stop," White said.

"Here, most people want you to do 45 minutes to an hour."

Unless, of course, it's the end of a long, festive day. If all goes well, White will reach the stage at 10 p.m. Saturday, ready to deliver 90 minutes or so of soca sounds.