

New Zealand bands bring island vibe to GLC

By Stephen Smysnuik

Promoter chased Black Seeds and Katchafire for four years to get them on same bill.

Who: Black Seeds, July 8

Who: Katchafire, July 9

What: A New Zealand Showcase

Where: GLC



Walking through the village, you'll think you've stepped through some kind of wormhole in British Columbia and ended up in an Australian mountain town. The Oz are bloody everywhere. This isn't a bad thing, exactly – if it weren't for them there'd be no women in this town.

So what better way to celebrate Aussie pride with – you guessed it! – a New Zealand Music Showcase featuring dub and reggae music. It makes perfect sense.

"That's fine, the Aussie's can come check us out," said Black Seeds lead vocalist Barnaby Weir, with what may have been a touch of sarcasm. It's difficult to tell with that accent.

"At the end of the day, after the rugby and after the rugby league, we're the best of mates," said Katchafire vocalist Logan Bell.

Both bands are among the most celebrated reggae acts in the world and household names in New Zealand.

And one thing's for sure: Kiwis love their reggae. It's in their blood as an island people, first of all, but the Maori were also very influenced by roots reggae and used it as their voice in their fight for equal rights. Bob Marley's influence has been as profound to the Kiwis as John Lennon's has been in the UK and North America. In the last 10 years, there's been a revival of reggae in the mainstream music scene in New Zealand. Both Katchafire and the Black Seeds were at the forefront of the movement.

"All indigenous nations and all walks of life can identify with (reggae). It's hard to describe the vibe and the feeling," said Bell. "It's just you hear it and you know it. You can't touch it but you can feel it, you know?"

"We like our own specific infusion of reggae music and soul music," Weir said.

Things haven't changed so much for them or for Katchafire; they all still write songs and play shows around the world. It's the industry that has changed.

"When we first started up, there wasn't a lot of competition around, but competition breeds excellence, y'know? I think it's a healthy scene," Bell said.

It's that scene that has kept both bands in their native New Zealand. Their fan-base is largest there. It's home. Rock and indie bands from Wellington or Auckland will typically migrate to Australia because there's a better chance of making it in the industry – like a Calgary band moving to L.A or New York – but Oz doesn't have that same island mentality that feeds so heavily into reggae.

"If you move away from where you're from, sometimes it can take the soul out of the group," Weir said. And, let's face it – without soul, reggae is nothing but grooves and reverb.

The showcase's promoter, Reggie Tika, felt that the swarms of Kiwis living in Whistler don't get the same recognition as the Australians. When he was living in Whistler, Tika saw numerous Australian acts playing in Canada but felt that New Zealand bands "were lagging in the background."

He had New Zealand friends who often felt they were a long, long way from home, so he thought he'd bring a bit of home to them.

"There are an ample amount of artists that want to venture out here, I'd been specifically targeting those two bands for years."

He chased the Black Seeds and Katchafire for four years, trying to get them on the same bill. There was no other way – it had to be those bands.

"They truly represent New Zealand," said Tika. "The way of the people, the way they go about their lives, in their attitude."

They differ in many ways – Katchafire started out as a Bob Marley cover band (they take their name from The Wailers' debut album *Catch a Fire*) and have made a career building upon and refining the roots-based grooves pioneered by Marley. The Black Seeds use reggae as a foundation and work it over with soul-based grooves, wiring the sounds through synthesizers. But reggae is reggae, brutha. The two bands are spreading the "One Love" we hear so much about. Dell says he'll run into the Black Seeds backstage at festivals. They've never collaborated, but there's been the odd jam backstage. There's a mutual respect between all members of all the bands and they're likely to channel that energy back to the audience when they play. Or not. Either way, it'll be a high-energy couple of nights at the Garibaldi Lift Company July 8 and 9 and someone, at some point, should feel the love. Or something like it. Because what's reggae without the love?

"I've been able to see the power of reggae music having gone throughout the world myself," Bell said. "It definitely has an undeniable power about it."

While both bands are household names in New Zealand, hardly anyone knows about them in Canada. A few indie music and comedy fans might have heard about the Black Seeds as Flight of the Conchords' Bret McKenzie's former band (and yes, it's true), but that's about it. Reggae is filed under "World Music" in the few record stores still in existence. Beyond Marley, the Buena Vista Social Club and that unfortunate Gloria Estefan period in the 1990s, World Music has never been a big seller in Canada.

But that doesn't mean anything. Live music is good music (usually) and a showcase of two of the most celebrated live reggae acts is sure to sway an ass or two.

"They're a bunch of funky guys that want to bring a good party," Tika said.

The Aussies will like that just fine.