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The emphasis is on the positive

West Indian Girl sings about life

By Brie Iatarola
 August 5, 2005

"Bliss, joy and revelation." That's how vocalist-guitarist Rob James describes his band, West Indian Girl.

Those words may not divulge much about how the Los Angeles-based group – named after a strain of LSD that has been known to elicit some wacky hallucinations – actually sounds. All it takes is one metaphorical dose of the band's self-titled 2004 debut album. Songs like "What Are You Afraid Of," "Hollywood" and "Miles From Monterrey" fuse ambient electronic rhythms with drums, guitar, bass, keyboard and sirenlike backup vocals.

"There's really no direct reason why we named ourselves West Indian Girl," confessed bassist Francis Ten, who first met James in a Detroit guitar store back in the '90s; years later, the duo teamed up in Los Angeles and formed the band. "Part of it is because the three words literally sound good together."

To clarify how West Indian Girl sounds, it may be easier to think of the group (which performs tonight at the Casbah) as the happy offspring of a gentle Jane's Addiction and the Chemical Brothers, with touches of the Sundays, the Verve and new-school Whale. Yet categorizing the band is something Ten hesitates to do, especially when it comes to its live performances.

"We're sitting in a weird sector of music," he said. "We're not pigeonholed into playing with a certain type of band; we're playing with all different kinds, some of which are a big part of the jam-band scene."

"But I wouldn't characterize us as a straight-up jam band at all. We're more like a positive band that jams."

These jam sessions bring to the fore West Indian Girl's three remaining members. Drummer Mark Lewis keeps the tempo in check, while Chris Carter sprinkles each song with spacey dashes of the keyboards. Although fellow lead singer Mariqueen Maandig did not join the gang until November 2004 – after the debut record was released – on stage, her sultry voice and looks complement James as he warbles whimsical lyrics like, *It's so hard to leave, waiting for the world to kiss the sky*, and *I lost myself inside someone else*.

"We're drawing inspiration from everything," Ten said. "There's a lot of the California state of mind, which is a little freer. And the songs are about life and our experiences."

Some of those experiences suggest an altered state of mind, as in the song "Trip": *You could dial your mind and listen to thoughts made young and pure / Moments never lived until we forgive / a part of ourselves we could never be*.

Despite its abstract messages, West Indian Girl does occasionally get local and national radio play.

"Radio stations are conglomerates, and there's more of a controlled atmosphere about what type of music gets played," James said. "I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing, because it makes people work a little harder to find something under the radar. A lot of great bands are boiling beneath the surface."

DATEBOOK

Turin Brakes, with West Indian Girl
 8:30 tonight; The Casbah,
 2501 Kettner Blvd.,
 Middletown; \$10; (619)
 232-4355

■ Brie Iatarola is a San Diego writer.

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