

On returning to Pittsburgh, Yves Jean sings city's praises

BY MICHAEL MACHOSKY
TRIBUNE-REVIEW

About 10 years ago, there was hardly anybody bigger on the Pittsburgh music scene than the Yves Jean Band. And not just because the soulful 6-foot-5 Haitian-American rocker literally towered over everybody else.

Then, all of a sudden, it seemed like he just disappeared.

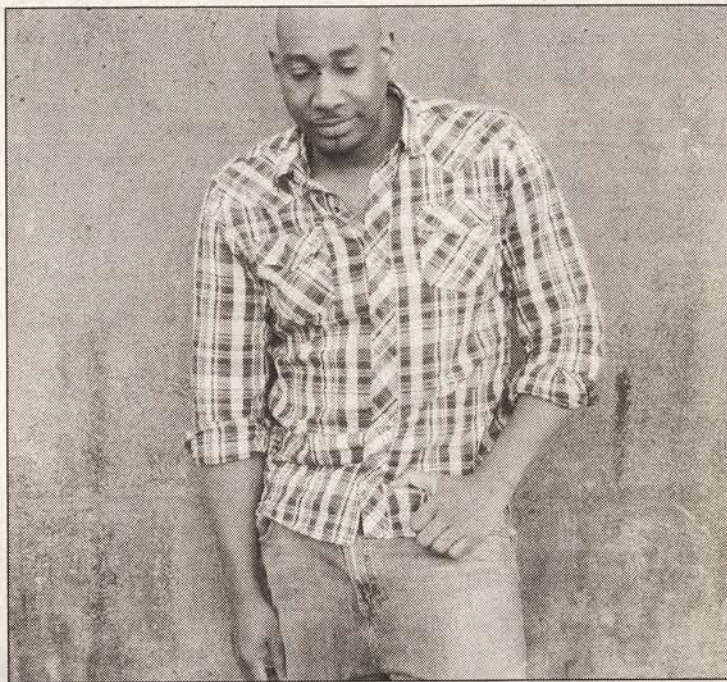
"When I started doing big numbers at Metropol and Graffiti, sometimes I wouldn't even have to promote, and people would show up at a show. It was a good feeling," Jean says. "But I'm not from here originally. I'm from New York City. I didn't want to just be a local band."

And life has a way of intruding upon the best-laid plans.

"Unfortunately, I went back to New York to deal with my mother's cancer," he says. "It wasn't supposed to be a long hiatus. I started playing shows in Europe. At the time, we had a six-, seven-piece (band). It got to be too hard maintaining a group. We were kind of a hybrid, playing the jam-band and the rock scenes. I knew the jam-band scene was kind of faltering, and I wanted to progress further."

Now it's just Yves Jean without the band. He's back living in Pittsburgh, and has a new album called "Love and Desperation." The release party is Friday night at Diesel, and part of the cover benefits the American Cancer Society.

Coming back to Pittsburgh did present some opportunities. "Well, Pittsburgh is 'The Most Livable City,'" Jean says. "My rent's \$300 a month. In



YVES JEAN

Yves Jean is releasing his album "Love and Desperation" on Friday at Diesel in South Side.

New York City, it's \$1,700 a month for half a bathroom and roommates. I can take a band over to Europe from Pittsburgh just as well as from New York."

The album deals with some pretty dark themes — songs like "Loneliness" and "Stand Alone" seem designed to

release some of the demons that have haunted Jean since his mother's death.

"When she died, it wasn't sudden," he says. "You know the earthquake is coming, but you're not ready for the aftershocks. I felt abandoned and cheated — this woman who

Yves Jean

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Admission: \$10

Where: Diesel, South Side

Details: 412-431-1125

didn't do anything wrong, very religious, got taken away in the most painful way.

"My mom left me an inheritance. Most sane people would invest in a house or something. Me, being slightly crazy, said, 'I'm going to invest in a record.' It was very therapeutic. Part of the mourning process was doing this record."

Finding the right producer was a priority.

"I left phone calls, sent e-mails — most wouldn't give me the time of day," Jean says. "Then I contacted this gentleman, Ken Lewis, and asked him if he could point me in the right direction. I asked him, 'How much do you charge?' He goes, 'I work with John Legend, Kanye West, so I charge about \$100,000 — seven to 10 grand a song.' I was like, 'Whoa.'"

But Lewis liked Jean's music, and decided to help him out anyway. The completed album definitely has a radio-friendly, punchy pop sound

that could appeal to fans of Dave Matthews or Ben Harper. The catchy choruses and multi-layered, world-beat-inflected production keeps even the darker songs sounding upbeat.

As a black man in a rock band, Jean knows from experience that he presents some marketing challenges.

"People say, 'You're marketable because of your name and ethnicity. But do you cater to an African-American market?'" Jean says. "No, I don't — 99.9 percent of my market is white. The other 0.01 percent is Haitian, because they'll support anyone who's Haitian."

That's one of the reasons playing in Europe has been such a revelation for Jean.

"When I was in Denmark in August, sitting down with a couple bigwigs from the music industry there, they asked, 'How would you market yourself?'" Jean says. "I said, 'Oh, just a 6-foot-5 black dude playing rock music.' They said, 'What does your skin color have to do with your music?'"

"I almost had a tear in my eye," he says. "Wow."

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