

## MIX MUSIC

Malaika Ballantyne, Kevon Carter, Joey Ng Wai and Sarah Hansson.

# A new Imij for Carnival 2014

By Essiba Small  
essiba.small@trinidadexpress.com

**O**FFSTAGE, the members of the band Imij & Co are just as entertaining as they are on stage.

During our interview they were cracking jokes, poking fun at each other and laughing out loud.

Joey Ng Wai, the band's general manager and leader, is the chief jester. Vocalists Kevon Carter and newcomers Malaika Ballantyne, Sarah Hansson and Dominique Villarruel also known as Lee, are his sidekicks.

Jokes aside, Imij and Co has been around for over 20 years — albeit in different incarnations — and still remains a relevant aggregation today.

Last year, while other bands were on the road for Trinidad Carnival, Imij was in Venezuela entertaining an audience of calypso and soca lovers.

"For four nights — Carnival Saturday to Carnival Tuesday we played to huge crowds every night," Ng Wai said.

"The band's musical mix included a back-in-times segment with songs from Kitchener, Sparrow and Crazy."

For Carnival 2014, Imij is back on the scene. Fans of the band would notice that the band's front line has changed once again, following the exit of Hilton "Ghetto Flex" Dalzell.

"Change is inevitable," Ng Wai said.

"Even in the corporate world companies have to deal with changes."

Since he and Ghetto Flex worked together from age 16, Ng Wai said Ghetto Flex's exit felt like a teacher losing a student.

"I wish him all the best. Time will tell whether he made a good decision or a bad one."

Ng Wai said since last year the band has been going through a rebranding process.

"Twenty years ago in this business all you had to be was good. Now you need the bells and whistles."

As such, the band has brought in Chris Granger and Shiraz Ojeer. Granger handles marketing, while Ojeer is the band's booking agent.

Fortunately for Ng Wai, with each member change over the years the band's sound remains unaffected.

"The same person doing the programming of our music hasn't changed since 1993, that's why the music sounds the same no matter the line-up of front line singers."

Choosing the right singers too also plays a major part in maintaining that Imij sound."

Ng Wai remembers every detail involved in the hiring process of each front-line singer who has ever worked for the band. With each singer he had a background story that he was only too happy to share.

When he first saw Ballantyne, for instance, he joked that she was 11 and was holding her father, calypsonian and writer Gregory Ballantyne's hand.

"Oh gosh no!," Malaika squealed before bursting into laughter.

Ng Wai said the second time he met the singer was when she came into the Imij bandroom for *Digital Rising Stars* rehearsal — Imij being the backing band for the contestants of the talent show.

"From the moment I heard her I went to the producer of the show one time to find out



what the contract says about hiring her after the competition. I saw something in her that I felt would make her a good fit for the band."

When Ballantyne placed third in the competition, Ng Wai signed her almost immediately.

Ballantyne believes she brings versatility to the Imij with her ability to perform any genre of music.

"I don't limit myself to what I can sing."

With Sarah Hansson, the band's other female singer, Ng Wai was online with her father and friend, when he first heard about her.

"Her father and I met when he owned the Soca Rebel band in Sweden and we became and remained friends."

Ng Wai told Hansson's father that he was looking for a female vocalist and Hansson suggested his daughter.

"I sent her four songs to learn and to my surprise she not only learned the songs but recorded her vocals on each of the songs. That was it."

Hansson, who is part Trini part Swede, made an impression on Ng Wai and joined the band in the second week of November 2013.

"I grew up listening to old time soca in Sweden," Hansson said.

"I think I bring to the band that pop side feel of soca."

The band's two male vocalists Carter and Lee were introduced to Ng Wai by friends; Carter through DJ Majestic out of New York and Lee through the band's bassist.

"He came to the bandroom twice and I didn't know he was the Kevon Carter I was told about," Ng Wai joked.

"As quiet as he looks there when Kevon get on stage is a different person you know," Ng Wai said.

"Sometimes he might even have a wardrobe malfunction," he added, his comment prompting raucous laughter among the group as Carter feigned innocence.

"I think I bring fun and vibrance to the band," Carter said.

Lee, who performed with Melobugz before coming to Imij, also fits in well to the Imij line-up. He believes he brings energy to the band and feels fortunate to be working with a "great bunch of people".

Carter and Lee both have songs out for Carnival 2014 — Lee with "Kitty Cat Pop" and Carter with "Main Road" and "Pressure".

Imij and Co will return to the studio after Carnival to put out an album for July/August, Ng Wai said.

Meanwhile you can catch the band at most of the major Carnival fetes in all their fun-filled, energetic glory!