

MALAIKA BALLANTYNE AND SARAH HANSSON

FRONT LINERS FOR IMIJ & CO



Sarah



By Nicole S Farrell

Malika Ballantyne and Sarah Hansson, the new vocalists with acclaimed band, Imij & Co, are opposites in some ways, however, they share a similar perspective when it comes to their responsibilities as band members and professionals.

Hot on the heels of her participation in the local "Rising Stars" competition late last year, Ballantyne was snatched up by Joey Ng Wai, Imij & Co's guitarist and musical director. Ng Wai was actually fulfilling the duties of musical director for contestants of the aforementioned competition when he saw her per-

form. Although she placed third, the 27-year-old Ballantyne was his first choice to complement his band's frontline. He immediately investigated her contractual commitments so there would be no conflict of interest with his offer. Ballantyne has been on a whirlwind ride ever since.

Changing gears from being a solo artiste to being part of a group dynamic was easy, however, it proposed a change in mindset. Doing the interview with Hansson at her side, she was forthcoming about her experience. "When it's just you, you can kind of cheat and do what you want but with a band, you have to be on your A-game at all times. You have to bring out your best." With the rigorous schedule of the band, she has learnt to accept that free time is rare. "Every day is something (to do)." Feigning exhaustion, she and Hansson shared sentiments about their schedules which included rehearsals from Tuesday to Sunday, learning new songs within three days or less, memorising choreography, last-minute calls to appearances

and interviews, and other commitments. Hansson, interjected, "In this business, you really have to love it to do it. You don't get much sleep." Said Ballantyne, "We just take it one week at a time."

Ballantyne is the daughter of calypsonian GB (Gregory Ballantyne), and her baptism into live performance was the year he won the Young Kings competition. "He had the answer-back to (Brother Marvin's) 'Jahaji Bhai' that year. I was seven or eight years and I told him that I was going on stage with him and didn't care what I had to do. When he won, that was it! I said I would not stop."

Since then, she has maintained private gigs, participated in several national competitions and events, and was even crowned Miss La Reine Rive in 2012. Her father encouraged her dream to be a performer. "He was cool. I never felt forced. I always had a brave spirit. Stage is not a fearful place for me."

Laughing huskily, Ballantyne recalled trying to learn the runaway hit of yesteryear, "Johnny", which was sung by the effervescent Collen Ella, of the band, Taxi. Agreeing that it was one of the best songs ever, we all took turns mimicking Ella's intro into the song. "I had to do it in our set and was so nervous because it's how she (Ella) used to sing that line, how she came into the song. I had to bring that too. Then, it comes right in, so if you miss it..." Ballantyne admitted that she has been learning to play the guitar "off and on" over time but has never formally studied music. "I can't read music to save my life!"

Hansson is of mixed heritage as her mother is Trinidadian and her father is Swedish. He heads the band Soca Rebels, which is the first and only band in Sweden to focus solely on soca. The part-time model was also exposed to pan as her father also played the pan with the steelband Big Lime. Also 27 years old, she recalled hearing her father blast soca at their home when she was a child.

Now in the mecca of soca and having to perform fast-paced songs, I noted that wining was par for the course. Glancing at her mischievously, I asked, "Soooooo, can you wine?" This provoked spontaneous laughter from both girls. In a sweet voice, she responded, "Yes, I always knew how to wine but since joining the band, I never winned so much in my life. It's really, really fun though." Both girls spoke over each other lightheartedly as they agreed that winning was just something that had to be done. Acknowledging that the average Trinidadian would deliberately observe Hansson's wining abilities simply because she's not a native, Ballantyne said, "Yes! People would want to see if she could wine but then they would be like, 'Aye! Homegirl wining yes!'"

In Sweden, Hansson's forte was pop and R&B. She described her songs as Caripop, which is "pop vocals