

ARTS

BY JENN BECK

IT HAPPENED AT the Flamingo, on a Thursday night. The weather outside was frightful, but Ujamaa was slated to play, so the crowd made the sacrifice of initial misery versus eventual elation. The wind was blowing people down the stairs all touchy and granular and self-absorbed, and at the door they stamped hands with little blue unhappy faces.

MUSIC
Ujamaa
Flamingo

Inside, everyone indulged in their favourite bar-tic: checking for the hundredth time to see if their coat was being ashed on, pulling down whatever piece of clothing was too short, or checking their wallet to consider the ratio of beer to food tomorrow or cab-fare home.

A hush fell over the crowd. Once we'd wiped it off, the multicoloured wash of the gel-capped stage lights lulled us into tidal, swaying, rapt attention.

The music pulsed out tangibly, and was so busy being absorbed by our sternums that it bypassed less direct auditory canals. The beat syn-copated our hearts to the accentuated throb-give, throb-give of hope promised and denied, and I could have sworn I saw the lost flicker of a lighter or two raised in a gesture too high for practicality.

Everyone started dancing in that curious slow-motion, underwater crabwalk that reggae habitually inspires, their focuses as inwardly directed as their centres of gravity. As if hypnotised, a table of women abandoned their coats and purses to fate and carried their full drinks to the dance floor, where they swooned as gracefully as anemones and never spilled a drop. Everyone moved with buoyancy, as if their hearts were inef-fably light but lead weights were randomly attached to their joints as ballast.

Reggae lends itself to grand, sweeping bodily gestures that drift and waft away before they are completed; the

We barely Ujamaa'd all seven into this photo



maestro of these is Kwame Dawes, Ujamaa's lead vocalist. He shuffled above the bobbing mass of dancers with lyrics pouring from his impossibly relaxed stage presence, fronting a six-person band that functioned as a complete, compact unit. The material performed was all original and wonderful, and is available on Ujamaa's debut recording *Chokota*.

Chokota is an impressive first release, filled with songs tried and tested on the clubscene: I have warm memories of listening spellbound to "Burdens" and "Rain" some time last winter when the weather was trying to prohibit my good time.

The more I listen to this production the better it gets. My favourite tracks are still the ones I remember from the live performances, but the unfamiliar tunes are infectious good reggae. "Different Style," for instance, is a strong dance track with a great hook, featuring Mike Doherty as principal vocalist.

"Burdens" simply must be heard and listened to carefully, because the angry lyrics belie the sun-shiny reggae sound. Interspersed between dark "Burdens" and politically painful "Mr. Lazarus," the whimsy of "Rain" is refreshing and vivifying. "Version World" wraps up the album with a complex lyric and a haunting sound. Altogether, Ujamaa is a wild ride that must be experienced to be truly appreciated, but the new release *Chokota* comes as close to live action as inert substances can get.

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