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Ya Maka My Weekend has built quite a reputation since its inception in 1992 as the inaugural festival of Rock Island's The District. Not only has it grown from a festival for residents of the Quad Cities to a regional destination, but reggae bands fight for a place on the two stages. "We've already had calls for next year," said Terry Tilka, talent buyer for River Cities Productions, which arranges the entertainment for the Jamaican-themed event.

 The festival (slated for August 10 through 12 this year) has reached comfortable institution status, with attendance leveling off at about 20,000 people. Tilka said he has a stable of between 40 and 50 "really good" bands from which to choose each year.

 But that doesn't mean organizers are content to repeat themselves. Tilka added four bands this year that haven't performed at previous Ya Maka fests.

 Just as important, The District makes an effort to "add one major element each year," said Jennifer Walker, executive director for The District. The biggest addition this year is the "mad-hatter division" of the sand-volleyball tournament on Thursday; anybody who wants to play chips in \$5 and gets put on a team. The regular tournament continues through Saturday.

 Also new this year is cricket instruction by Tom Melville, Wisconsin-based author of *The Tented Field: A History of Cricket in America*. As with the music, Melville sought out Ya Maka, and not the other way around. Walker said he called her earlier this summer after seeing the festival on the Web. "It sounded like a great match," she said. Melville travels around the Midwest, teaching cricket at festivals celebrating all things Caribbean, because of the popularity of the sport there.

 The Jamaican West Indian Folk Dance Company returns this year after a one-festival absence, bringing authentic singing and dancing, colorful costumes, and a great rapport with the audience. "It adds a nice mix to the festival," Walker said. "We really do stick to the theme. We try to make sure it's a cultural event, not just a party."

 But it is a party, too, driven by the reggae sounds. Unlike other types of festivals, Walker said, a lot of

Jamaica in Ya Maka

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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attendees aren't really familiar with the individual bands: "The people who come just like the feel of reggae."

 Sounds simple enough, but putting on a Ya Maka requires more than dumping a dozen or so acts of undetermined quality onto two stages. "You don't want four bands playing the same covers," Tilka said. "We like to go after the younger, hungrier bands."

 Because the Quad Cities aren't a major market, Ya Maka can't afford to pay the big-name reggae bands the fees they ask for. That doesn't mean organizers aren't pulling in quality bands.

 History and reputation work in the festival's favor. When Ya Maka began eight years ago, there were one-third as many reggae fests as there are today, Tilka said. So while bands are trying to secure spots on the rosters of festivals – they pay better than bars – the festivals are also competing for the best bands. Longevity is an advantage, Tilka said.

 Finding just the right "feel" in the music isn't necessarily easy, either. For one thing, Tilka said, reggae bands tend to be "notoriously late. They just don't take care of business." Other groups are simply too mellow: "They're so laid back they're boring," he said.

 Last year, organizers tried out some reggae bands with an Africana feel, but they didn't connect with audiences. So Tilka kept it simple this year, focusing on Caribbean sounds with a touch of roots.

 The bigger names and return acts are scheduled in the later slots, while the bands new to the festival play earlier in the day. Roots, Stem, & Branches play a noon set on Friday and a 3 p.m. gig on Saturday. While adept in reggae, Tilka said, the band is well-versed in many types of music. "These guys are so flexible they can change their entire set list" to suit a promoter's needs, he said.

 King Solomon, Immunity, and Carl Malcolm & Positive Vibration Band are also new to Ya Maka. Milwaukee's King Solomon (3 p.m. Saturday) offers an upbeat blend of reggae, ska, dub, dance, rock, R&B, and funk, and the band was nominated for a local industry award after being together a mere six months.

 Immunity (5 p.m. Friday and 4 p.m. Saturday) also hails from up north – Michigan. The band, led by award-winning vocalist Jonathan Pettus of Trinidad, began touring the western part of the state and in 1995 settled in Detroit, where it's grown into an area institution.

 Those bands are mere toddlers compared to Positive Vibration (4 p.m. Friday), which Malcolm formed 20 years ago when he settled in Washington, D.C. after scoring international hits with "No Jesting," "Miss Wire Waist," and "Fattie Bum-Bum."

 These newcomers are joined by Ya Maka veterans Natty Nation (10 p.m. Thursday and Friday), Shangoya (8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 7 p.m. Saturday), Marcus Yabba Griffiths & Traxx (11 p.m. Thursday and noon Saturday), Wailer B. & Axiom (8 p.m. Thursday, 7 p.m. Friday, and 10 p.m. on Saturday), The Ark Band (3 p.m. Friday and 11 p.m. Saturday), Cool Riddims & Sista Teedy (11 p.m. Friday and 6 p.m. Saturday), and Baaro (9 p.m. Saturday).

 Ya Maka My Weekend runs from 8 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. on Thursday, noon to 12:30 a.m. on Friday, and noon to 12:30 a.m. on Saturday. Admission is \$5 Thursday and \$7 Friday and Saturday. In addition to live music, the festival features an open-air market and authentic Jamaican cuisine.