

Reggae plus: Freedubstar plays The Arlington



By Harold Eastman

The energy was high and the vibes were good last Saturday night at Maynooth's Arlington Hotel, thanks to the eclectic sound of Freedubstar.

The Toronto-based trio describes itself as a psychedelic dub band with an edge?-an edge that comes from a mix of musical elements and influences: psychedelic rock, funk, R&B and ska. Michael Cooke steers the ship on rhythm and lead guitar, powerhouse drummer Derek Musgrave drives it forward and Dane Wedderburn on bass lays down the fluid musical lubricant that keeps everything running smoothly. All three contribute on the vocal front, with a mix of material that includes both reinterpreted covers of some classic??reggae and otherwise??plus original material by the songwriter Musgrave, aka Deelion.

The band originally formed in 2009 when Cooke was first introduced to reggae by Jamaican-born drummer and singer Raffa Dean. Cooke took to the music in a big way and adopted Dean as his musical mentor. Together, they founded Freedubstar, which soon grew into a kind of musical collective that brought together some of the best players and songwriters in Canadian reggae. Tragedy dogged the band, however, and in particular Raffa Dean. Dean lost a son to a senseless shooting in Regent Park in 2010, survived a hit-and-run accident in 2012 and then succumbed to cancer earlier this year. Cooke met Musgrave at Dean's funeral, and with that encounter, Freedubstar began to rise from the ashes. When Musgrave recruited long-time friend Wedderburn to the project, the rebirth process was complete.

While the band may have a short history in its current form, it certainly doesn't show. The music??and the good-natured vibe on stage?-was irresistible for Arlington patrons. Many of them spent a good part of the evening on their feet. And it's a safe bet that many of them also hope that Freedubstar will be back this way sometime soon.