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A New Soca Dynasty: Black Empire's EP Signals a Musical Revolution in the VI

With 'End of the Road' poised to contend for Road March, Black Empire's latest release signals a vibrant revival in Virgin Islands Soca music

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From top l2r: Richard James, Kevré Hendricks, Darnelle Phillip and Moziah Miller.
Bottom l2r: AJ Ventura and Masai Harris. By. BLACK EMPIRE

There are moments in time so significant that they instantaneously become historic. These could be in any particular discipline: when man landed on the moon, for example. Or closer to the topic at hand, Taylor Swift's record-breaking Eras tour that has been so impactful that [even the Fed took notice](#). Closer to home in the USVI, there were the eras of Jam Band and its leader Trevor Nicholas Friday, or "Daddy Friday" as he was affectionately called, and Seventeen Plus, among

other great seasons of prime V.I. music.

This style of music, though it lives on, has experienced a lull in its greatness even as a drip of hits have endured during the genre's quiet years.

Yet, after listening to all six songs of Black Empire's EP — a new band formed by members of the intentionally dismantled Fusion Band, with two additional members that have made the group a cast of all-stars — it is safe to say that the V.I. style of Soca music will not only live on, but is about to experience a renaissance.

My belief in Black Empire came moments before the Consortium's [latest "Interviews & Drinks"](#) programming, a livestream series where entertainers are interviewed ahead of the Crucian Christmas Festival season. I was on my way home to prepare for the hourslong session. AJ Ventura — one of the group's new members known as a renowned singer, songwriter and producer — had earlier airdropped the entire six-track EP to me. I turned on my car stereo and the moment I pressed play, I was completely blown away by the music Black Empire had concocted. My drive home to prepare for the interview turned from a par-for-the-course exercise into a moment of complete surprise and excitement. Surprise because I certainly wasn't expecting what the band had composed, and excitement because as a music lover, I knew this was something special.

Every song on the EP is not only good, they also bring a high level of quality and universality that takes the music beyond the boundaries of the Virgin Islands. Memories will be created among lovers and friends from the song "End of the Road", a track that will be hard to beat for Road March with its charismatic and magnetic rhythm and jumpy tempo. Then there's "Jouvert Behavior", which starts with Trap music then graduates into the pure and undeniable style of V.I. Soca music. The ladies will surely make good use of this song with their sensual moves during fetes. "Remedy", a groovy jam with an irresistible melody and seductive lyrics, continues the EP's trend of music that was intentionally created to appeal to masses beyond the USVI.

Then there's "9 Lives", which unapologetically borrows from the well-known style of Dominica's Bouyon Music while doing it on par with the originators of the genre themselves. The song has witty lyrics that disguises its true meaning to convey bedroom romance without the fear of censor.

"Bumbs Away" Provokes a lively and unrestrained response from dancers, boldly and without regret, and "Sound Check" stays to true to the purity of the V.I. style all while keeping the larger audience in mind.

Along with new member AJ Ventura, the band also includes another new cast member, Masai Harris, [a Grammy Award-winning producer](#). Both men are now indispensable to the group's new sound.

Black Empire is led by lead singer Darnelle Phillip, known as Blackest, a 10-time Road March winner and former frontman of The Fusion Band. Blackest, also a prolific songwriter, spoke about the new group during the interview, explaining how it has elevated his creativity. Other members include producer Kevré Hendricks (Maestro), Richard James (Sleepy), and bass player Moziah Miller (Ziah).

The songs were mixed by Mr. Harris and mastered by Malvern V. Gumbs of Spectrum Band out of St. Thomas. The EP will be released on all platforms in one week.

"It's more of a movement of creatives," said Mr. Ventura. "It's a conglomerate of creatives pushing the culture forward. It's engineers, it's deejays, it's producers, it's songwriters, it's beat makers, it's

everybody."

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