

The politics of poverty make meat and drink for protestors, yards of copy for journalists, and occasionally some very good music, especially if you follow the Marxist philosophy that music should reflect the culture and lifestyle of the people who make it.

If music is politics, then reggae is the left wing, be it from Kingston or Brixton, or in UB40's case, Birmingham. Ali Campbell of UB40 happily refers to their music as 'subversive.' They are an unashamedly political band, whose members grew up together in the working-class district of Moseley, Birmingham.

An English record company executive (not Richard Branson), recently claimed that the recession had spawned lots of new bands and new ideas. The man equated hardship with creativity, a viewpoint I repeated to UB40's lead guitarist, Robin Campbell. He wasn't impressed:

"There may be a lot of bands because there are a lot of unemployed people, who've got nothing else to do. I don't know whether it's healthy, I think there's a lot of revival stuff that's pretty crappy — soul, swing, etc — but there's very little that's new or different. Another trend gets snapped up by the press and given the big treatment, and it lasts for maybe 12 months. Everyone is panicking these days, trying to find a new trend."

"A new 2-Tone," chimes in brother Ali. "The only new music that's happening is reggae," Robin continues. "It's in the strongest position it's ever been. It's still such a young music, it's only in its first stages, and there's still more to come."

"There's a really strong British reggae movement, and the British audiences don't hear enough of it. It's improving slowly, but the media aren't prepared to play it."

"Reggae has been constant over the years, but because it's not a trend, the media ignore it, and so people don't get to hear it. The radio is that strong, it has that much control of what's being heard. If 'Food For Thought' hadn't been played to death by the radio, then we wouldn't be in the position that we're in now."

Is there an element of racial prejudice against something that is still essentially considered black music?

"There is, when the lyrics are Jah-dominated. I think it helps that our lyrics are a lot more accessible. But at the same time, I think that to a large percentage of the people, the lyrics are irrelevant. They take no notice of the lyrics, they're into the music, which is danceable. But to some people, our lyrics and our standpoint are our greatest strength. It was a conscious effort on our part to play accessible music. Subdue them with that, and hit them with the lyrics."

Is that a militant approach?

"Well, we don't have the solutions, we don't incite anything. We don't offer any answers. All we do is reflect the situation as it is. It's up to the individual to make up his mind what to do about it."

"The whole situation about lyrics influencing people is purely personal, anyway," says Ali.

UB40's music reflects personal experiences as well as prevailing conditions, not that the band was born from hardship.

"I don't think it's poverty that made us start," says Robin. "It's just that those of us who were working didn't want the jobs they were doing. Basically we were social misfits. He's never had a fulltime job (referring to Ali), but I've worked and I've



UB40, Mainstreet.

earned good money. It's just that I haven't wanted to do the jobs that I've done. We've all known each other for 10 or 15 years, and we've always talked about forming a band. And when half of us were unemployed and half were doing jobs we didn't want to do, we said: 'What the f\*\*k are we playing at, why don't we do it instead of just talking about it?' And that was it. Those of us who were working gave their jobs in, and we went on the dole to form the band."

UB40 have had their share of hassles, leading to their split from their original label, Graduate, and the forming of their own label, DEP International.

"Basically, it was a breakdown in communications," says Robin. "We were with Graduate for 12 months, and we signed with them because their ideas and our ideas coincided. They offered us a really good deal, no money, but a good percentage, which no other record company would offer us. But over that 12 months, we grew apart. Things happened that we didn't know about, things happened that we didn't want to happen."

An example was the release of the band's *Signing Off* LP in South Africa, with the track 'Burden of Shame' deleted. UB40 didn't know about that until a journalist phoned them, asking for comment.

"That really upset us," Robin recalls. "One place we really wanted 'Burden of Shame' to be heard was South Africa. That was the last straw. Our option came up at the end of the year, and we said: 'No, forget it.'"

"We decided we could do it ourselves, and we proved it with 'The Earth Dies Screaming', which we recorded, pressed, packaged and released by ourselves. That sold the same as every other single in Britain, it went top 10."

The problems didn't end there, though. Graduate took UB40 to court, and the injunction meant they couldn't record for six months. With nothing coming in, they were flat broke when they started recording again in May of this year.

However, UB40 are now riding the crest of a wave (in their own words), with *Present Arms* going straight to number one in Britain. They're happier with it than its predecessor, again because it's all their own work.

"After we'd finished gigging, we had three months to get it together," says Robin. "The dub ideas came from first takes, we made them up as we went along. There's no plan beforehand, the mix just comes out as it comes out."

"We find that songs lose a lot if you rehearse them too much. We prefer to produce our own stuff, because nobody else wants to do things the way we want them. *Signing Off* was a compromise because Bob Lamb was involved. We're not running him down, but his ideas weren't the same as ours, and the end result was an album that we weren't entirely happy with."

Eight tracks from *Present Arms* have also been re-worked in dub form. The album has just been released in Britain, and we should see it here before long. UB40 are also putting together their own studios and rehearsal rooms in Birmingham, which they plan to let other up-and-coming bands use as well. Once DEP International is self-sufficient, they want to sign other groups.

"There are too many bands about that just don't get the chance to be heard," says Robin. "If we've got a successful label, and it's UB40's label, then hopefully everything we release will automatically get some kind of airplay. We're a truly independent label. Nobody's pulling our strings."

The Sunday night show at Mainstreet was a bit of a mess, with little time to set up the gear properly, or do a decent sound check. Herbs had real problems because of this, yet the capacity crowd was right with them. The anti-Springbok demonstrations of the previous day were still fresh in everybody's minds. Despite the sound difficulties, the enthusiasm of bands and audience alike won the day.

The following night was miles better. Herbs played an exuberant set, with Astro and Michael from UB40 at the back, nodding their approval.

UB40 make peerless head and gut music. The audience understands their message, and sings it back to them:

*I am the one in ten  
A number of a list  
I am the one in ten  
Even though I don't exist ...*

Their records only hint at their power onstage. A living, breathing, sweating rhythm, so irresistible it makes you want to laugh and cry all at once. Hundreds of bodies move in unison. Occasional collisions are shrugged off with a smile at each other. The feeling is that good.

Astro, the life and soul of the party, introduces 'Madame Medusa'. Usually their 'rock against Thatcher' number, tonight it's 'rock against Springboks.' This band appeals to the conscience.

*There's no-one coming with that freedom train  
There's nowhere you can go where you feel no pain  
Take the blinkers off your eyes  
The power's in your hand  
Stop waiting for your ticket to the promised land  
Don't let it pass you by ...*

In contrast to the Sunday show, where nervous frowns were the order of the day, the band is wreathed in smiles. They know when they're playing well, and those who went to both shows will appreciate the difference.

Even on a bad night, UB40 are world-beaters. Music you can feel as well as hear. I'm still dancing.

Duncan Campbell

# I'd love a Beer.

