

New Zealand bands got a better deal at this year's Sweetwaters. The top ones got good time-slots, everyone got their hour's worth. Some used the opportunity well, others less so. A few were truly able to drive home the point that New Zealand music can hold its own with the outside world. Herbs were one of the few.

It was only fitting that Herbs should join UB40 on stage at Sweetwaters — they had set the scene so well for the British band an hour and a half earlier. Herbs' set had been hard to fault, their Polynesian dancers (could any other band have gotten away with bringing dancers onto the stage?) were a great success. Some people would say Herbs were the best New Zealand band there.

Herbs has its roots in a band called Back Yard, formed four years ago by original singer Tony Fonoti, drummer Fred Faleauto and guitarist Spencer Fusimalohi. The name was changed to Pacific Herbs, then, three years ago, the band became Herbs.

Dilworth Karaka joined on guitar at the time of the early Trident pub gigs and soon after Will Ilolahia became the band's manager.

The band told Ilolahia they wanted to get serious, wanted to work their way up. Most of all they wanted to establish their own identity, a Pacific identity, in the music they played.

Since then there have been a number of lineup changes, most notably Fonoti's departure —

forcing Fusimalohi and Karaka to take over the lead vocals.

Herbs' progress from a cover-playing weddings/21st band to one of international standard has been quite remarkable. The success has up until now been far from national, however. The South Island tour Herbs undertake this month will be their first.

The tour will promote the band's album 'Light of the Pacific'. The first, 'What's Be Happen?' mini-album has sold more than 3000 copies in its New Zealand and Pacific editions and the two singles 'French Letter' and 'Jah's Son' have also sold well.

## HERBS rolling in the Isles

Koha: love.

Finally into the basement Herbs use as a practice room. Been a job to find. Just through this door and ... shit. They've got a chain on it. Shout quietly, someone lets me in.

"Uh, hello, I'm from Rip It Up."

"Wassat? ROLL IT UP? You're just in time!"

What's the state of society, Herbs?

"Fucked," from the back.

What's wrong? Growing racial hatred? A political swing to the right?

"I thought it was just how rich you were," singer-guitarist Spencer Fusimalohi says quietly.

Can this band help out this country?

"I think it already has," says bassist Jack Allen. "We've made people a bit more aware of what's going on — like with the nuclear thing. No one knew about it."

"We'd like people to become more aware and take notice. I lived a happy life, did my eight hour job and was totally ignorant that these things were happening until I joined the band. It made me aware."

"The awareness came across when we started to do koha gigs for Green Peace, organisations like that, from the early days," drummer Fred Faleauto, a large man, continues. "Koha gigs are love jobs."

Fusimalohi writes almost all the band's lyrics, odd for a man so softly spoken and one whose English is imperfect:

"I don't even think about writing, it's just a thing that comes to me. But that's what's happening all right. You've got to let the people be aware."

There is a lot of political content on your new album 'Light of the Pacific'. Do you worry that this may deprive it of the radio play it will need to sell well?

"I don't look at it that way, but it's good to bring it up. To us it's not really important," Fusimalohi says.

Do you worry about ever having to compromise your integrity for the sake of commercial success?

"I think we think about it — when we look at our pay packets sometimes. We're always conscious of that. It's just a matter of survival," Allen says.

They agree it's not going to stop them singing about political issues.

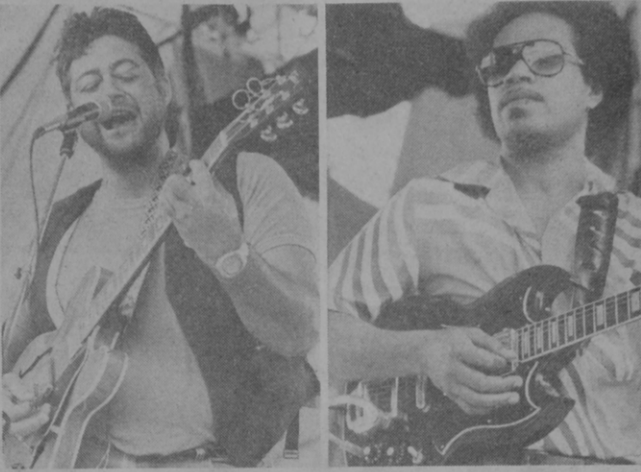
Are you pleased with the album?

"It took us a long time," says singer-guitarist Dilworth Karaka, a big, thoughtful man, who seems more interested in the music than the issues.

"We were in the studio for three months but the songs actually came out nine months before that. It's just been a mixture of getting them together and knowing which way they were going and getting them tight as a band. We actually prefer to play the stuff live. It's a different sound in the studio. But that's our studio sound."

One of the songs on the album isn't in English. What's the story there?

Herbs' Dilworth Karaka and Spencer Fusimalohi.



photos by Kerry Brown.

"It's a medley of old Polynesian ethnic songs. We know who wrote a couple of them, but two of them are so old that we can't trace it. Now we appreciate what it's like doing copyright and that sort of thing."

"I mean, you're not in contact with that sort of thing until you start making records. You go, 'Copyright? Who's copyright? I never knew him!'"

"It's a different thing from making music," he says. "Although it's certainly a part of the industry. But only the people that sell records make money out of records."

You're learning though?

"We've gone to other bands we know have been through situations like that and asked them for advice and guidance on going into signing contracts. About the pitfalls in contracts. We've used it to our advantage."

Among the first musicians to help the band was the Legionnaires' Harry Lyons. The album itself features several other well-known musicians, including Malcolm Smith and Bunny Walters. Planning the next one I suppose?

"Into it."

You're all Christians, yet in songs like 'Jah's Son' and 'Jah's Children', you sing about Jah rather than God. Why?

"It just fits the music," Spencer explains. "You don't have to be afraid to use Jah just because you're not a Rastafarian. Rastafari is everywhere. Everyone is a rasta in their own way."

So you don't reject rasta in the manner of many Christians?

"We don't reject any religion, so long as it's not harmful," Allen says.

Can you see any problem in becoming successful with the obvious marijuana tie-up of your name?

"No. Herbs is like ingredients," Fusimalohi says. "And we are the ingredients. So we cook this one and try and get something out."

"In the islands they wanted to know 'What's this band Herbs coming here for? They coming to promote marijuana?' But it's just to play music," Faleauto says.

What effect did the islands tour have on the band?

"It gave the band an extra burst of inspiration, more song-writing, more awareness of the two types of living standards," he says.

Were you more New Zealanders, tourists, than Islanders?

"Yes. They would look at you and still look at you as a tourist, which was very hard to get away from. You've got to stay there for six months before you lose that stamp and become one of the people."

"There's the same problem with Polynesian people coming here and getting mixed up with hire purchase agreements."

"Things they'd never understand, like if they wanted something in the islands, they'd pay cash for it. Whereas coming over here you haven't got cash for it so it goes under HP and there's nothing worse than the repossession man coming round."

"Mind you, that's the same for everyone now," Allen says.

Karaka, Allen and saxist Mori Watene are Maoris, Faleauto, Fusimalohi and keyboardist Tama Lundon are of island descent. Has there ever been friction between the two different groups following the band?

"No. In the early stages I did see it as a problem, before the band was formed," Faleauto says. "I'd walk into a pub and there were a lot of Islanders and they'd look at me and say I'm a Maori. I'd walk into a pub full of Maoris and they'll look at me and think I'm an Islander. The major problem I've found is the young people from the islands who come over here and get carried away with drink."

"I think there's more harmony between the two races now," Fusimalohi says.

"I think it boils down now to just individuals and the majority of Maoris and Islanders get on well," Allen says.

Has the band helped there?

"I would say so," says Faleauto.

What about bringing Polynesians and Pakehas together?

"Well, we've now got a Pakeha in our band. He's working on our sound. He's Greg Keepin', he used to work with the Instigators."

"He's just getting used to our, ah, hours," he says, smiling.

"Pakehas have a different type of feel," Allen offers. "It's hard for us to get in and feel with Pakehas if we go out for a jam."

What's different?

"I think it's just the genealogy."

"But I've had some really good jams with some Pakeha guys. Just switched on straight away," Faleauto says.

The band has been touted as a good prospect for international success. Do you worry about coping with that?

"Oh yeah, it's there subconsciously but we don't worry about it. We just take things in our stride," Fusimalohi says.

"Don't worry, it's the Polynesian thing. Just take your time," Allen grins.

What's the role of manager Will Ilolahia in the band? He seems to worry about these things a lot more than any of you.

"Yeah, he's the worry man," Faleauto says. "Well, he leaves us free of the main worries anyway."

So what's for the immediate future for Herbs?

"We've got plans for overseas gigs, the islands again, Aussie. If we make all that it's good. If we don't, it doesn't matter too much. Nothing's firm at the moment," Faleauto says.

Can you see the day when you may have to turn down koha gigs?

"You can't turn down these things. Every day's a koha day," Fusimalohi says.

"But it's really hard to judge," Allen says. "I don't know how you'd be if you were exposed to it."

"We could change. People that come into power, they change. It happens all the time — to everyone that's given power." Russell Brown



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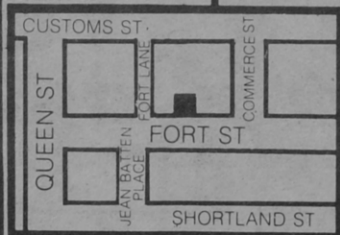
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