



Taking Sides

Photo by Donovan Gabrielsen

Michael Franti has always impressed me, and with the release of Spearhead's *Home*, I was convinced he was a 90s hip-hop guru.

At nearly seven feet tall, Franti has a commanding presence and his demeanour is intense and serious. I meet he and 'vibemaster' Rasta Zulu, and leave the high-rise record company office for some hip-hop posturing for the camera down a deserted alleyway.

Sunglasses on and arms in the quintessential hip-hop pose, Franti and Zulu do their thing. Zulu finds an abandoned bottle of Jamaican Rum down the alley, and insists on a photograph of himself pointing to the cartoon Rastaman on the label.

Franti seems younger than I expected and I am beginning to wonder about the vibemaster's job description.

We return to the office of one of the record company head honchos, and set the tape recorder running.

Zulu sits in on the interview. At times his decade of ganga smoking makes his answers incomprehensible, though at other times he is almost poetic.

Franti sits in the boss' chair at the plush offices and answers my questions thoughtfully. A native of San Francisco, he was adopted by a white family and met his birth parents only four years ago. He comes from a mixed race background, his mother white and his father black, and both were pleased to meet him.

Franti (27) has been writing songs since he was 10 years old.

"The first thing that inspired me to write a song was my girlfriend in fifth grade," he says, with a rare smile, "and it's still my girlfriend that inspires me today — only it's a different one."

With Spearhead, he has moved away from the preachy doctrinaire sentiments of his previous band, the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, to issues that are more personal than political.

"I've found if you're yelling at people, they'll only listen to so much and you alienate a lot of them. I compare the Heroes to broccoli — you have to eat it 'cause it's good for you — while Spearhead is more like sweet potato pie."

Franti has just completed some work on Harvey Keitel's latest film, *Blue in the Face*.

"The song is called 'Where the Love Goes',

and it's kinda about my girlfriend and how, even though she drives me crazy sometimes, I love her a lot — she's the world's greatest."

He is also very complimentary about Aotearoa.

"I always feel welcome here. My friends George Nuku and Teremoana gave us a traditional Maori greeting, and the emotions it conveyed were deeper than I could describe in language."

Franti sees a sharp contrast between this greeting and the welcome they were given at the airport in the world he calls Babylon.

"A dog came up and sniffed us, and three of our group were strip searched for a whole hour. They found nothing."

To add insult to injury, those who arrived on the same plane for the Asian Development Bank Conference were afforded their own passport window and walked right on through. Franti seems anything but a member of the Lost Generation, and he is resentful of the label.

"The baby boomers are getting old and fat and ugly, and they take it out on us. They call us the Lost Generation 'cause we don't wanna deal with all the bullshit they've created."

So where's the hope and what are the solutions to the problems he is so keen to discuss?

"There's not a way out necessarily. We're still dealing with all the same shit, and it's up to us to manage it and not destroy it. Everybody has to decide what side they're on. There's always gonna be right and wrong. There is no answer or final solution. It's just all about liberty and life."

Oh, I get it — I think.

"We must live in peace or rest in peace," Zulu adds, in his thick Jamaican accent.

But music is what it's really all about, and that's what Spearhead do best. With a new line-up, Franti is happier than he's ever been.

"For the first time it's like we're a real family. We'll be touring for the rest of the summer, and as soon as we get back we'll start recording our new album."

What will it be like?

"It'll be more hip-hop and reggae feeling. There'll be more of Zulu's influence in there."

I apologise in my head for ever doubting the necessity of a vibemaster and the interview concludes.

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