

MULTICULTURAL HERBS READY TO GO BACK TO THEIR ROOTS



Auckland's multi-cultural reggae band HERBS has achieved all but one of its aims ... a symbolic journey back to its origins. The HERBS story is traced by freelance writer, Kereama Reid.

For HERBS, the journey has been long, almost too long. The disappointments perhaps too many. And yet the peaks that this five man reggae band have reached are higher than those of other bands. In the past year they have albeit briefly, shared the same stage as Stevie Wonder, they have opened shows for English reggae bands Black Slate and UB40 ... and they've put onto record some of this country's finest and most significant contemporary music. But still the HERBS story runs deeper than that and means more than just music ... there is a lifestyle and conscience about HERBS that sets them apart.

The HERBS journey began some three years ago, the group taking shape out of social bands, from reading messages picked up on the street and from traditional rock influences.

Gentle roll

New Zealand-born Samoan vocalist, Tony Fonoti speaks of "Jimi Hendrix, Cream and of course Bob Marley". HERBS music is a unique type of Polynesian reggae, a reggae set against the gentle roll of Polynesia and a reggae for the streets of Ponsonby, Newton and Otara. And HERBS are similarly aware that by their very existence they represent a step forward and believe that what they do is as much for others as for themselves.

As guitarist Spenz Fusimalohi puts it ... "The whole thing was to open doors.

There's brothers sitting out there with talent that hasn't got a chance to get through. There are many musos in Tonga without any chances, and I want to open the doors for them. What we are trying to do for them is to tell them what's happening at the moment ... and not just here but elsewhere too."

Shut doors

But for HERBS themselves, many doors have seemed firmly shut. The bread and butter of any group's work is in playing pubs, football clubs, lunchtime school concerts, even charity gigs if they will get you an audience. But the group has consistently run into trouble ... too often their approaches to hotel management have met with a refusal. Why?

Toni ... "There's really two reasons, but pubs will give you the second ... and they still have a good case. The reason would be that our music hasn't got as wide a range ... it appeals to a smaller crowd. But there is another side. They don't want a Polynesian band playing in a pub and drawing a Polynesian crowd ... the brown people."

Angry and disappointed nods from the band and manager Will Ilolahia affirm what Toni says, and yet as Toni further points out. "There's never been any trouble, not even at the beginning. And now we draw varisty students, lawyers, teachers, the hippies plus the Polynesian crowd".

This welcome broadening of their base reflects their efforts of 1981 to play wherever and whenever possible.

Notable success

Sweetwater's '81 was perhaps their first notable success, if nothing else HERBS were different. They played reggae and their uplifting rhythms were in direct contrast to most of the downer rock hammered out at that potentially ugly festival. HERBS were well received on that score alone. By April they had worked the available pub/club circuit and were chosen to open for the Western Springs concert by American soul super-star Stevie Wonder. The concert was an unfortunate disaster.

On the night an April storm swept the city and although HERBS managed to play what Auckland Star critic Colin Hogg called "the warmest most seductive reggae I've heard in a long time", Stevie Wonder could only appear long enough to tell the crowd of 25,000 that there would be no show from him that night. But for HERBS the experience was important.

"From Stevie Wonder we learnt that if its 45,000 or 100 people you've got to go out there and do your best," says Toni.

And that best was quite good enough to secure two other support concerts over the next few months.

Lessons learned

In August there was the tour with English reggae band Black Slate, then topping local record charts with their single "Amigo" and a top selling album. But few who saw the Auckland Town Hall concert would disagree that the night belonged to HERBS. The audience, predominantly Polynesian, were treated to a stronger and more forceful HERBS than before. And again lessons had been learned. Black Slate were essentially party reggae, the messages are there, but they are sprung on dance rhythms.

"From Black Slate we learned a good thing," Toni acknowledges, "to be positive, to put everything into it regardless of how you are feeling at the time ... if you are positive then the people are too."

A month later and HERBS were stunning Auckland audiences again, this time at a steaming Mainstreet Carbarret in front of an audience who had come to see yet another English reggae band, UB40. Again praise for their set was unanimous and this time the stage competition was even tougher. By the end of the night HERBS had assured even the meanest of cynics that they could hold their own on stage with the best that could be offered.

Hard grind

Away from that spotlight however the grind is hard. Two nights before talking to the band their sole income for the week came from a dance at a suburban intermediate school. The band,