

HERBS ... THE FAITH, THE FOLLY AND THE FINANCE

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It's a cold clear Wednesday night and standing talking with the 'extended family' of the Herbs sound crew you are caught in the crossfire of your emotions.

The band are elsewhere, some at home with families, others already at the gig somewhere across town. Here at Mascot Studios in a Newton backstreet, homebase for the independent record label Warrior, the sound and lighting crew are ready to go to the venue. The gear is already there, but nobody has got any money to put petrol in the car. A lot of digging into pockets. "Will, you got any money for gas?"

Manager Will 'Ilohia hasn't. He gave it to somebody else earlier on. The matter seems unresolved but the crew shuffle out into the night anyway. Money worries. Always. Seems to be in the nature of things for anyone associated with Herbs.

And you're standing here talking to these guys about their tour to the islands due to start in a fortnight. Freight charges that run off like telephone numbers. Air fares ... and there's no money for gas. There's a good story in this, you're sure ... and yet the folly of it all seems to get in the way. These guys are so determined that it will all come off that you couldn't even suggest anything to the contrary. "It's faith brother." You believe it.

Perhaps you need to step back a little and get some perspective on it.

History of faith

The history of Herbs has been pretty well documented by now. The multicultural band that rose from street level on the basis of faith, dreams and a brace of some of the most important songs ever written by Polynesian New Zealanders. Always aiming high; to tour, to make records, to take their unique Pacific reggae to as wide an audience as possible. All these things they have done. Toured with overseas bands and played every concert offered them, often performing free if the cause was right. Made a superb mini-album, "Whats Be Happen", which broke into Auckland's Top Twenty album list. And drawing audiences which cut across racial and age lines.

But the big goal, the seemingly elusive one, was to undertake a tour of the islands. A homecoming. A search for roots. Taking something cultural away and returning with something special inside.

But the tour was fraught with problems, mainly money problems. However up until early June things were running particularly smoothly and everybody was feeling up.

The game plan was laid out when Herbs applied to the Commission For Independent Pictures for a grant of \$62,000 to make a 50 minute television film of the island tour. From this would flow a number of other bonuses, the most important being assistance from Air New Zealand who could see their way clear to assist with freight and fares for a slice of on-screen time. Herbs carrying Air New Zealand bags,

extolling the virtues of our national carrier in song possibly, the koru featuring prominently on their special Pacific cassette edition of "Whats Be Happen" released to coincide with the tour.

Other finance would flow from Warrior Records, the Internal Affairs Department which allocated almost \$9,500 to cover the freight of the full PA system and of course the endless fundraising 'farewell' concerts.

But even a band as used to disappointments as Herbs were rocked by events in the month prior to their departure.

First blow

The first blow came when vocalist, songwriter and frontman Toni Fonoti quit. Manager Will jokes, "Everyone has left this band. I'm always quitting. It just works like that, but we're all still here". Toni's departure was different however. The group sense that this time it's far more serious, and that would have a severe effect on the bands stage presence because Toni was the performer, dancing and swaying ... reaching out to the audience.

It is possible that after a break Toni will return, there was no acrimony about his leaving and he still spends as much time with them as he always did. But for a week the remaining members debated whether or not to go on. When you've travelled as far down a road however you must push on. As drummer Fred Faleauto said of Toni's departure in a radio interview at the time, "Herbs is like the land struggle, it's a continuing thing".

And so, resolved to continue, planning went ahead for the tour in a final flurry of farewell fundraising concerts.

Greater need

A miserable Monday at Glenfield College on Auckland's North Shore. A lunchtime concert by Herbs, one of their last. It gets underway late because Herbs have had to borrow someone else's sound gear. They've lent their better gear to another band whose need was greater. Outside its cold and small groups of kids huddle around the hall windows trying to sneak a look at the band. Inside 160 others paying a dollar a head. \$160 to be split eight ways. A days work.

The second blow came ten days after Toni's departure. The crucial application to the CIP fund, upon which so much depended, was turned down.

Chairman of the CIP board which dealt with the Herbs application, Rod Cornelius, was genuinely sympathetic to the nature of the project, but, as befits his position, had to look at the application from the professional television angle. The fund was established to provide money for films to be made for television, many of the projects being already some way towards completion, and this sitting the board had to deal with over twenty applications.

Many television films have received CIP assistance in the past and recent successes have included the highly regarded "Man of The Trees" documentary and the two Rewi Alley films.

But perhaps the most important reference point for the Herbs application was the film "Keskidee Aroha". Some two and a half years ago a predominantly Jamaican music-drama troupe from London, Keskidee, toured New Zealand, performing on marae, in prisons and in schools. A kind of intercultural exchange. However the film planned, and assisted by CIP, has only just been screened on television. So what went wrong?

As the Keskidee tour progressed, much changed. Cultural interchanges of great emotional import failed to be translated to the small screen due to insurmountable scripting problems. There were many difficulties implicit in making a film at speed, keeping up with unpredictable events. Intercultural contact was occasionally soured by lack of understanding of protocol, and filming became a testy business. Inadequate facilities to film at night, inside homes.