

UB40: For the Many

Robin and Duncan Campbell on why bands break up, their political songs and their new album, *For the Many*



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British reggae group UB40 at the Birmingham Symphony Hall, 2010

UB40 ARE RENOWNED FOR THEIR political songs and there are several more on the new album, including *Gravy Train*, *Poor Fool* and *I'm Alright Jack*. Was the title of the new album inspired by Labour's slogan, "For the many and not the few"?

Robin: "Yes, absolutely. We're nailing our colours to the mast as we always do, and we've met Jeremy Corbyn several times. He even came to see us play at the Royal Albert Hall but it was young people who overwhelmingly voted for Corbyn, and that gives me hope for the future."

Duncan: "It's the first time I've felt excited by politics for a very long time. I never signed up to the Blairite thing at all but I've managed to snatch a few words with Corbyn and he's bloody marvelous. It was like meeting Nelson Mandela, I'm telling you!"

"I'm Alright Jack was originally called *Typically Tory* but refers to any one of those careerist bastards, no matter what they're called or which party they belong to, because we live in an era where someone can get a massive payout for getting it wrong. Once you're on the gravy train, it really doesn't seem to

matter what you do."

Robin: "It's about anyone who sets out to feather their own, but Duncan came into his own on this album because those are the best lyrics he's ever written, without a doubt."

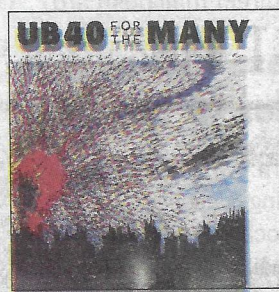
There's a lot of dub reggae on this latest album, just like on your first two albums. Is it true that UB40 were originally intended to be a dub band, and Duncan was your first choice as lead singer? Also that you're going to release a dub album of For The Many?

Robin: "Yes, on all counts. Back in 1978, Ali originally wanted us to be a dub band but we told him we'd never get anywhere doing that. I said, "The only way I'm joining this band is if there's singing in it and you're the lead singer", but he didn't want to do it. He wanted to play drums and that's when I first encouraged Duncan to join us, because the three of us had been singing together from childhood."

Duncan's first full album with the band was Labour Of Love IV. Didn't this represent a major turning point for UB40?

Robin: "Yes, because we were all there in the same room, jamming on the songs and we recorded the tracks live, without so much as a computer in sight and it was fabulous. We were definitely happy to be back as a

band and reliving the kind of chemistry that comes from working together, and Duncan fitted straight in. He enabled us to keep that UB40 sound because of the brotherly vocal blend. When he sings some of the older songs, like "Food For Thought" or "One In Ten," he sounds amazingly like a young Ali."



Everyone but Brian contributed songs to the new album. Is this unusual?

Robin: "Yes, it's unheard of! Everybody felt inspired, but that's what being in a band is about, because when someone writes a lyric we then all contribute ideas until we come up with something that's made between us. That's how it works."

UB40 have the Midas touch when it comes to reworking classic Jamaican reggae hits.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34



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Duncan Campbell with UB40 at the State Theater in Sydney, Australia



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 32

However, there's only one on the latest album, which is lead single "Moonlight Lover" — a cover of the Joya Landis rocksteady hit, sang by Norman. He's UB40's percussionist, so what's the story behind this?

Robin: "That was one of the first records Norman ever heard as a kid. He's always loved it and it was him who got Gilly G to demo the tune with him soon after we'd done the Promises And Lies tour. If you know Norman, you know that he absolutely sings from the bottom of his heart, but "Moonlight Lover" stayed in the archives for years before we decided to release it. Gilly was doing a day job by then but we'd kept in touch, so we rang him and said, "We're just about to release that track you did with Norman all those years ago. We've re-recorded everything on it except your vocal and we're going to release it as a single, so do you want to come and perform it at the Albert Hall next Tuesday?"

Duncan: "He was brilliant as well. He absolutely killed it."

Right from the start, UB40 has been run along democratic lines, with each member having an equal share. Is that still the case?

Robin: "Yes, totally. When most

bands break up they blame it on musical differences, but it's usually financial differences when the other members see just one or two guys earning all the money from songwriting. Then they'll start fighting to get their stuff recorded, which can lead to bands accepting inferior songs. That's why we said, "No matter who does what, we'll split everything, and every song will be a band composition." We may acknowledge that so and so wrote certain lyrics, but financially everything's shared between the band members, and still is.

"Remember, it took Ali 30 years before he started to say "I should be earning more than anyone else," and that wasn't down to his composing, because he never wrote any lyrics. It was down to him being lead vocalist and thinking he was therefore more important than the rest of us."

Bassist Earl Falconer wrote Whatever Happened To UB40? Is this a message to the three members who left the band?

Robin: "Well that's Earl's take on the split, but he wrote it after we took part in a documentary which purported to be neutral, but wasn't. The filmmakers spoke to me, Brian and Jimmy but didn't ask Earl and Norman

CONTINUED ON PAGE 36

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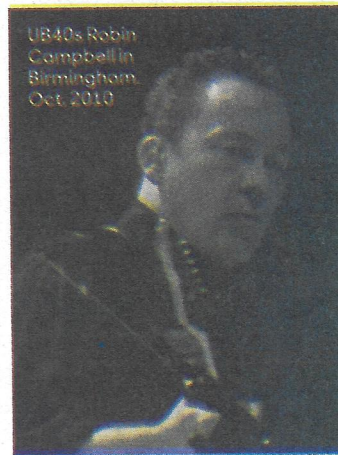
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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 34

a single question despite them being founder members - unlike the two guys with Ali. Earl was left feeling annoyed and frustrated because after Astro quit people on Facebook were saying that he would be next. That's why Earl wrote that song - it was to let everyone know he was never going to leave the band, and that those who'd already done so were traitors."

Earl has been involved with several side projects over the years, most notably Circus Records - a label that's credited with having brought dubstep to the mainstream. How does this impact on what UB40 are doing?

Robin: "Well, Earl's tracks are much more street than what we usually do, but that's the kind of music he produces for himself. He's a jungle freak and that's always going to inform the stuff he brings us. I know there's a section of our audience that will find them too extreme because they're more into rocksteady and



UB40's Robin Campbell in Birmingham, Oct 2010

SONIC/ALCO/WIN/HERO/COMMONS

vein as *Baggariddim*, which we did in 1985 with some Birmingham rappers. In fact, two of the guys who deejay on that album, Slinger and Pablo Rider, also appear on the main album as well as the collaborations album. Dubmatix, Freestylers, Danny WAV and others have done remixes, something that'll have crowds blowing their whistles and going crazy, and we have Kabaka Pyramid on the main album too, who's really articulate. He responded straightaway.

"Then there's KIOKO, a local Birmingham band who are on the verge of happening and House Of Shem, who we've worked with in New Zealand. They did three songs but there have been quite a few people who've wanted to get involved. We've also got tracks with Black Hero, Inner Circle, Tipper Irie, Leno Banton, Gilly G and Winston Francis, the original Mr. Fixit. We've even got a song with General Zooz from the Indian reggae band Reggae Rajahs, who opened for us when we played in Mumbai."

lovers' rock, but those tracks are great for the album and bring another flavour that's likely to attract younger people who don't usually listen to UB40."

There's talk of a collection of collaborations and remixes to be released shortly after the release of For The Many. What can you tell us about this?

Robin: "What started out as a simple idea has resulted in this fifteen-track album called *Bigga Baggariddim* that's in the same

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