

UB40

BIOGRAPHY, SEPTEMBER 2008.

Most bands who've just celebrated their twenty-eight anniversary would be forgiven for resting on their laurels, and especially when they've more than fifty hit singles and seventy million record sales to their credit. UB40 however, are an exception. Their last two albums, **Who You Fighting For** and **TwentyFourSeven**, have been widely acclaimed, and the way in which they've triumphed in the wake of lead singer Ali Campbell's departure has proven truly remarkable.

To suggest that UB40 are currently experiencing something of a renaissance is an understatement. Crowds still flock to their concerts, and Robin Campbell's brother Duncan has quickly made his presence felt in the group. By returning to traditional methods of recording – i.e., playing "live" instruments as an ensemble, and also writing the kind of social commentaries that define the times we live in, just as they did on classic albums like **Signing Off** and **Present Arms** – UB40 have succeeded in rejuvenating themselves to extraordinary effect.

Whereas **Who You Fighting For** was an awakening, **TwentyFourSeven** has been described as a milestone, and both contain songs rivalling UB40's very best. A sense of enduring relevance permeates the latter. Tracks like **End Of War**, **Instant Radical Change Of Perception**, **Rainbow Nation**, **Securing The Peace** and the controversial **Oh America!** (featuring Rasa Don and 1 Love of Arrested Development) remind us just how potent UB40 can be when striking a blow for democracy, whilst **Lost And Found**, **This Is How It Is** and **Here We Go Again** skilfully articulate our inner landscape. Songs like these encourage us to reflect on what's happening around us, and question where we stand on certain issues. They possess a moral integrity that's all too rare in the current musical climate, but then UB40 never did follow trends, and nor have they abandoned the infectious warmth that's been a hallmark of so many hits in the past. Witness their glorious cover of Bob Marley's **I Shot The Sheriff** for example, or **Dance Until The Morning Light**, both of which co-star Maxi Priest.

Maxi's the latest in a succession of singers to have blessed a mic in company with Birmingham's finest musical export. Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders guested with them on UK No. 1 hit **I Got You Babe**, and **Breakfast In Bed**; the late Robert Palmer sang on **I'll Be Your Baby Tonight**, Afrika Bambaata guested on **Reckless** and 808 State remixed **One In Ten** – a track that's also been widely "versioned" in Jamaica. Not only that, but a galaxy of reggae stars featured on UB40's **The Fathers Of Reggae** set from 2002, including Toots Hibbert, Gregory Isaacs, John Holt, Ken Boothe and the Mighty Diamonds, among others.

UB40 had earlier paid their respects to the Jamaican pioneers who'd inspired them on three volumes of **Labour Of Love**. The band's versions of reggae classics like **Many Rivers To Cross**, **Cherry Oh Baby**, **Red, Red Wine** and **Kingston Town** not only provided welcome revenue and career opportunities for the original performers, but also helped spread a love of reggae right across the globe, and amongst people of all ages and from every walk of life. It's no surprise to learn that UB40 are the world's best-selling reggae act, second only to Bob Marley, except they've also played an important role in furthering Marley's legacy, and not just in terms of sales.

Reggae music has long championed the poor and innocent. At its best, it conveys a message intended to help forge a better and more just society, and uplift those in need. In accordance with their British, working-class roots, UB40 have risen to this task with distinction. They've empathised with their audiences, as well as entertaining them, which is why they were invited to perform at the Nelson Mandela concert in 1988 and Live8 in 2005, when they performed to an estimated television audience of three billion, and made the occasion count by highlighting anti-war material from **Who You Fighting For**. Such appearances – like those at former US Vice-

President Al Gore's Earth Concerts – go hand-in-hand with their support of charities like the United Nations AIDS Awareness Campaign and the Teenage Cancer Trust, and also their willingness to help further the careers of other artists, whether from Jamaica (as on **UB40 Presents The Dancehall Album**) or England.

The initial line-up was formed in a suburb of Birmingham during the summer of 1978 and comprised of Robin and Ali Campbell on guitar and vocals, Earl Falconer on bass, Brian Travers on sax, James Brown on drums, Norman Hassan on percussion and Michael Virtue on keyboards, together with MC Terence "Astro" Wilson. Another of the Campbell brothers, Duncan, declined to join the band, thinking they wouldn't get too far, but would seamlessly replace Ali on lead vocals thirty years later!

Right from the start, UB40 reflected a modern, multi-cultural Britain, and yet their line-up was based on solid foundations, rather than gimmicks. All the band members were friends from either school or the same neighbourhood, and shared a love of early reggae and dub. It was a sound that would easily distinguish them from the 2 Tone and new wave bands of that era, and provide an irresistible platform for UB40's songs of social conscience – their name having been inspired by an unemployment form, and their material by the injustice they saw all around them. Riots were threatening to tear many of Britain's inner cities apart, and reggae music proved the ideal vehicle for a band like UB40, who wished to make a difference, and make their music count for something. (All of which is still true.)

They were soon regularly performing at benefits for organisations like Rock Against Racism. **Food For Thought** then scaled the UK Top 10 in 1980, precipitating a run of chart appearances that shows no sign of abating, even nearly thirty years later. Early albums such as **Signing Off**, **Present Arms** and **UB44** made them huge favourites of the student crowd, but it was 1983's **Labour of Love**, a collection of reggae cover songs, which brought them widespread mainstream recognition, and gave the group its first chart album in America, and also their first No. 1 U.K. hit with **Red, Red Wine**.

UB40 have been an institution ever since; opening up new territories for reggae (most notably Russia in 1986), breaking attendance records in places like South Africa and racking up No. 1 hits in most countries around the world. One of their biggest-ever hits has been **Can't Help Falling In Love** – a song previously associated with Elvis Presley, and that was initially featured in the Sharon Stone film **Sliver** before spending seven weeks at No. 1 in America. The album it was taken from, **Promises and Lies**, went Top 10 on both sides of the Atlantic, and No. 1 in England during 1993.

Ten years and several highly rated albums later, UB40 joined forces with the multi-cultural choir United Colours Of Sound to record **Swing Low, Sweet Chariot** – an update of the classic spiritual that would become a major UK hit, and the official anthem of England's victorious rugby team at the 2003 Rugby World Cup. That same year, the band won an Ivor Novello award for International Achievement. Three years later, they were nominated for Best Reggae Album at the Grammy Awards in Los Angeles and more recently still, in September, they were presented with an award for Contributions To Lovers Rock by Linton Kwesi Johnson at the 2008 British Lovers Rock Awards in London.

On the surface, it would appear there's not much left for the world's leading reggae act to achieve. On current form however, UB40 are revitalised, and revelling in the opportunity to make their voices heard longer and stronger than ever before.

John Masouri

For further tour information, please go to:
www.ub40.co.uk