

HERBS

Herbs floated into my London bedsit last summer via a tape a friend sent. The bitter, plaintive single, 'French Letter', its anti-nuclear sentiment woven with big splashes of cymbal and nifty accordian, suited the summer's mood perfectly. Out on the streets people were on the march. It was a song that stirred the emotions and galvanised the conscience. That summer in Europe, meeting a Frenchperson was never the same.

Late last month, a few days before the band's third album, called *Long Ago* and dedicated to a nuclear-free Pacific, was released, another bomb was exploded at Mururoa.

Guitarist Dilworth Karaka is sitting in a Dunedin motel at the start of Herbs' two week national tour, speaking in a resigned tone.

"They (the French) are shooting them off all the time. When we were in Tahiti for a week we stayed next door to the French legionnaires. So you can imagine the friction. But the locals are great. Most of them have colour pictures of the bomb tests on their walls."

Willie Hona: "The trouble is the French presence there keeps them alive. It brings in all the money. Our anger isn't so much directed at the people as to what is being done to the environment. It's wrecking everything up there."

Karaka: "We will keep making people aware of it, too."

The second single from the album will in fact be 'Nuclear Waste'. Its message is wrapped in a jaunty sound — former Blockhead Geoff Castle guests on synthesizer — and there are plans to release it as an extended dance mix to the clubs. Rather ironical.

Hona: "Let's put it this way — get them to listen to it first and then let them analyse it. They are up there dancing around and then they start to listen to it. Faaar out! ... what am I doing jumping around up here to something like that?"

Long Ago was recorded at Auckland's Mascot Studios, owned by Hugh Lynn, who also established the band's label, Warrior. It was done over several months by musicians who have to hold down part-time jobs to keep families afloat and mortgages paid. They're working to change that.

"Our main aim with the album is to attract interest overseas. We've got a couple of people in Australia who are really interested. The thing about recording studios in New Zealand is that the answer you usually get back is — 'Yeah, it's good, but the production isn't together enough.'"

"When we are in the studio we try and get as



Guide to Herbs Cover:

1. Willie Hona. 2. Dilworth Karaka. 3. Carl Perkins. 4. Mori Watene. 5. Tama Lundon. 6. Jack Allen. 7. Fred Faleauto.

close to a 'live' sound as possible. The recording started off in 10 to 12 hour sessions."

Drummer Fred Faleauto: "I spent two days just perfecting the drum sound. In the end it was worth it because it made such a difference."

Hona: "There's a 30 second guitar solo I do on 'On My Mind' that took several hours to do."

Karaka: "But the hardest people to get across to are New Zealanders. I mean if we were the same type of band from New York playing the same music as us we'd generate a lot more people. They'd rather see acts from the States yet we have musicians here who are just as good, if not better. It's like a band is not good until they have been acclaimed overseas, like the Enz or something. We'll be happy if we can sell five to six thousand albums."

The first two sold around the 3000 mark.

While the pop equation — boutique clothes, swish videos, shallow radio tunes — still has all the appeal of a dose of the clap Herbs are getting more professional. For the first time on tour they have their own road crew and set, distinctively Polynesian and embellished in Dunedin with ferns foraged in an afternoon on the Otago Peninsula. Hona, with a history in cabaret, has apparently had an influence here.

"Never mind the 'she'll be right' attitude, it's got to be right. If you play one song then laze around, pass a bottle of beer across stage, the whole thing goes. I know at the start of the night you usually get a few people saying 'oh no, not the same old thing'. But by the end of the night they are leaping around. That's the buzz of the whole thing."

Karaka: "Last year we were offered a month's tour with Split Enz of the east coast of Australia and everbody was busting their arse trying to get

it together but we never had an outfit to look after us to go through with it."

On *Long Ago* Herbs have by no means entirely slipped their reggae moorings, but it does see them working more and more with rock overtones. There's the soft-rock of two introspective ballads, bordering on Mathis. On other tracks, much harder, the guitar assumes Santana-like proportions. There's the obvious Polynesian influence as well. But Herbs have never professed to peddle a pure form of reggae. Rather, they consider what they play as 'Pacific reggae'.

Hona: "There's always been that basic Herbs pulse. And it will be there as long as these two (gesturing at Karaka and Faleauto) are in it. They're the only originals left. This album is just colouration around the basic beat."

The widened scope of the music is put down entirely to the lineup changes since the second album, *Light Of the Pacific*, was released over 18 months ago. Gone is former vocalist and lead guitarist Spencer Fusimalohi. New on board are Carl Perkins (percussion), Tama Lundon (keyboards) and guitarist Hona, extending Herbs to a seven-piece.

Karaka: "It's all down to our individual influence. Each album has had different members and has sounded different for it. To me it's like a real creative thing, several minds contributing (songs are multi-credited). We have a keyboards player now and a synthesizer and it opens up a much wider range."

"We had been playing at parties and stuff for years and it's something that just came naturally when I jammed with people like Jack (Allen, the bass player). From reggae we stemmed into what we do now."

"We've found our music can capture people from grandmothers to grandchildren. People in New Zealand generally like ballads — New Zealand is really known for its ballads — so we thought why not put one or two on the album. We were lucky to come up with two."

What music do you listen to?
Silence. Then from saxist Mori Watene: "Anything that's on the way to number one."

Suddenly a room that previously contained big, reticent men is rocking with laughter, stirring shapes from Sumu wrestler to test rugby lock. Even if you've never liked the Herbs sandwich, it's always had meat in it — the political sentiments of the lyrics.

Karaka: "Once 'French Letter' did get some radio play the jocks that picked up on it called it 'Letter To France'. If we'd run off a batch of a thousand singles calling it that, who knows? Even for the cover of the first album (*What's Be Happen*, which featured an aerial photograph of the Bastion Point eviction) the comments were that it was too strong. But our answer to that is these things fuckin' happen. We've got things to say and we don't make them up in our heads."

A provoking moment on the new album is the track 'Lonely Faces', written by Samoan Faleauto about his native land. He explains:

"Basically we wrote the song here but when we went to Samoa it really hit home. What we found out was the younger people in Samoa, those

under 20, were committing suicide by jumping off trees and hanging themselves. Some were drinking this very potent weedkiller which burns out the insides and kills them over three days or so. Most of it's caused through embarrassment."

At what?

Karaka: "Say we were brothers and on the way home from school I saw you kissing a girl and said I was going to tell the parents ... they get embarrassed."

Faleauto: "It has just started happening in the last five years. They need some sort of release thing because life over there is very hard. There's no jobs. It's just pick up the knife and go to the plantation."

Apart from the cover of *What's Be Happen*, Herbs haven't touched on Maori land rights. Why's that?

Karaka: "It's almost something I feel too bitter about. The nuclear thing is bearable because it involves the whole world but for land rights there is only us and it's right in our backyard. Once people understand how important land is to Maoris then they'll understand Maoris. I'd rather just go out and do something like blow up the Air New Zealand building or something. There's a lot of organisations in this country that I don't agree with but I support them, even the ones that are anti-white. It's their way of expressing their frustration. It's always our land and the issue never deviates. All they have to do is give it back and let us decide what to do with it, not tell us."

"Half my family is European. My grandmother, she was brought up to be, think and act like a European. That is exactly what she is today. You tell her she's a Maori and she says 'No, I'm not'. I feel for her because she was told to be someone else instead of being herself. But there's a lot of people in her age group like that. It's even worse for the young today."

Cultural alienation is dealt with on the track 'Repatriation'. But it wasn't written by any of the band members, but by an English friend, Peter Stretch and it tells of the difficulties he had in assimilating himself into the way of life here.

Karaka: "It's something a lot of people don't appreciate. You leave your own country but you take its ways with you and that causes problems."

The night Herbs played Otago University the students were apparently all busily studying for exams and the crowd was meagre. It could just about have fitted back into the band's motel.

But Herbs gave the impression they'd have played the same in front of 40,000 screaming hooligans at Western Springs.

Hona: "Herbs to me is not just a band. We have all been in bands where you get up there and play for your half hour and sit down, have a drink and get paid at the end of the night. Here we are performing our own stuff and actually performing a show. We've still got a long way to go, but it's a family thing more than just a band."

Karaka: "We'd all like to do this full time."

Watene: "We all started doing this really young. We've got to the stage now where there's no turning back."

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