

Music from the Long White Cloud

Aotearoa, Dread Beat & Blood, Ardijah, Herbs



Herbs, Aotearoa, Ardijah, Dread Beat & Blood: photo call in Whangarei, July 29.

How do you pronounce Whangarei?

It seemed a relevant question in late July when the package tour of Herbs, Ardijah, Dread Beat and Blood, and Aotearoa played the city during Maori language week.

I had driven up to Whangarei thinking that the last night of a tour by such distinctive bands would make an interesting concert. I came away feeling that if there is any mainstream "movement" in New Zealand that's alive and *developing*, it is the Maori and Polynesian music of which these four bands, with the Patea Maori Club, represent the leaders.

It was a disappointment, therefore, to find upon entering the Kensington basketball hall only 400 people inside. (Still, it's a better percentage than Auckland, where only 700 ventured out to the Logan Campbell Centre). At the door, the amiable security guards (there was

no visible police presence — and no trouble) checked for forgeries.

First up at 6.30 sharp were Aotearoa, an eight-piece band from the capital, and unashamedly political. "We're a band with a message," said their leader Ngahiwi Apanui as soon as they were on stage. After a

long acapella introduction from several members of the band, the smooth, slick sound of Aotearoa emerged: wonderful harmonies, lyrical sax and guitar playing, and a superb, effortless rhythm section.

"This song is very important," stated Apanui bluntly, and with the opening declamation of 'Young, Gifted and Black' a tingle of recognition and revelation went down my spine. Done with a slow, heavy beat, Nina Simone's anthem didn't seem like a sentiment from another age, the pre-separatist optimism of the civil rights movement, but even more relevant to today, and this overwhelmingly Maori audience in Whangarei:

"You are young, gifted and black ... There's a world waiting for you Yours is the quest that's just begun ...

When you're young, gifted, and black

Your soul's intact!"

"This is another important song," we were told, and as the guitarist scratched out the slow reggae of 'Maranga Ake Ai', members of the other bands could be seen taking in the music and the message. "Pacific reggae" Herbs have called it; a rhythm which has been borrowed from another culture to become part of our own, and legitimately so, we were reminded with the dedication of the next song to the Kanaks, "the indigineous people of New Caledonia, suffering oppression under the French. This is an expression of unity and support."

The mood of Aotearoa was more like a rally than a lecture, however — the last song was "all about being positive," and the refrain said exactly that: "Think positive!" After the example of Aotearoa, it would be impossible not to.

With Dread Beat and Blood, it's the Jamaican influence rather than the political message that takes the forefront. They have the look and sound of a roots reggae band, and are as technically proficient at their music as Aotearoa are at their's; musical skill seems to be a point of pride for these bands. Another large group (though I forgot to count 'em), they have a daunting frontline of four unsmiling, dreadlocked rastas, all in Ray-Ban sunglasses and jungle fatigues.

Their first number cruises along in the trance-like manner of Big Youth: slow, sluggish reggae, as thick as Visco-static oil. The mixer really knows how to get that true, echoey reggae sound to the bass, which helps.

There are cheers and whistles from the audience as they recognise the poppier sound of 'No Woman, No Cry'; once again superb harmonies decorate a beautiful melody. An original follows, still with the spare keyboard work, slinky guitar, and high tenor voices characteristic of pure reggae.

After a long, mellow, farewell number, it's "Thank you Whangarei" ... Dread Beat and Blood are a testimony to the excellence that can be achieved — without losing an individual character — by coming up through the traditional route of playing covers, before trying out one's own work on the audience.

This point is hammered home when Ardijah take the stage. "If you're looking for a class act, this is it," introduces Ngahiwi Apanui. After an apprenticeship of many years in the clubs of south Auckland, Ardijah have *arrived*. With their slick production and stylish presentation — plus a single in the Top 20 — they certainly have the air of a "class act" from the big city. The crowd moves up to the stage to have a closer look.

With all four members dressed in deep red jackets, white shirts and black ties they make the other bands look dowdy. Like all the bands however, they have their own distinctive sound. Ardijah's is the sophisticated sound of club funk, provided by the silky voice of Betty

Monga, the delicate tenor of Tony Nogotautama, Ryan Monga's plucked Steinberger bass, the up-beat synths of Simon Lynch (the only Pakeha musician on the tour) ... plus a drum machine and sundry percussion.

Immediately their groove goes right through you with their own song, 'Joystick'; Betty adding rhythmic colour (congas, chimes, cymbals) and singing great backing vocals as electronic wizardry is provided by twiddling the synthesiser's joystick. Then, with ease and grace she sings 'Somebody Else's Guy', a torch ballad accompanied by Simon Lynch on piano.

Tony provides the on-stage repartee: "This is a song by a group who has been a great influence on us — Rick Dees and his cast of millions ..." No, no, just jiving — it's 'Time' by Mtume, with warm synthesisers, a la Bobby Womack.

Ardijah's is a seamless, tireless groove, and that's the only problem with the band — drum machines never let up, and after boogieing for a few songs, you're worn out, it's like dancing to a metronome.

'Time Makes the Wine (Get Stronger)', a great radio tune — if they played black music in Whangarei (though the concert was sponsored by the local private FM station) — is also Tony's guitar showpiece. There are many links between heavy metal and funk, and it's usually in the guitar solos; with plenty of echo, this was pure Jimi Hendrix — Tony just stopped himself from playing with his teeth.

"D'you wanna party?" With Ardijah's sign off song, they introduce the band, and their philosophy. Each band member has a moment in the spotlight — Ryan's solo, with his back to the audience, being tastefully short — to the nightclubber's slogan: "Dancing, and singing ... that's all I ever really want to do."

The complete professionals, Ardijah leave the audience still dancing, and with a message to remember: "Thank you Whangarei ... We like it here so much, we'll be back playing on Friday and Saturday ..."

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