



Toaster Rack

UB40's ASTRO WRESTLING AND WHITNEY

UB40 are having a night off in Pennsylvania. Astro is watching TV.

"32 channels. And it's all shit."

So you're not a wrestling fan?

"Awww, I love wrestling! Aww, it's wonderful, I love it!

Were you given some inside information on that or did you just guess?"

You can hear Astro grinning. "I think wrestling is one of the funniest things on TV today. I love it. I love watching people get hurt. It's so full of shit, but it's fun. I really do enjoy me wrestling."

I like Mr Fuji.

"Oh yeah, that little bald Japanese guy. He's brilliant."

Wrestling, like music, is an international language. Astro speaks wrestling with a Birmingham *Auf Wiedersien* accent, and toasts for UB40 with a West Indian *patois*. Now UB40 can also speak American — their 'Red Wine' single has just

we've left England we've seen their latest videos and songs, and then we tour the States and see their videos and they're at least three years old. What we've experienced with 'Red Wine' is apparently very common. It was originally released the same time you heard it in New Zealand, about four and half years ago. We arrived here to promote the new album *UB40* and it turns out that our audiences want to hear *Labour Of Love*."

1988 has been a year of ups and downs for UB40. On the up side: commercial success in the States, and a collaboration with funk/svengali Afrika Bambaataa that resulted in one of the year's most electric and attractive dance singles, 'Reckless.'

"We played in New York a few years ago and Bam asked us about doing something with him. And then a few months ago he was in England and said, come down to the studio. We did 'Reckless' in a day — wrote and recorded it, everything. I enjoyed it. I liked working with Bam. Never seen anyone who can eat chicken as fast as he can."

Would UB40 like to record more crossover music?

"Yeah. We've been doing it most of our lives." Astro laughs. "What I really want to do is popularise reggae music. When you say "reggae," that music should sound as easy on the ear as rock and roll does. We want it played everywhere, as frequently and in the same manner as middle of the road pop music. We wanted *Labour Of Love* to be our first

shot to number one in the States, only a few years after it was released. Astro is amused by the delay almost as much as he is by Mr Fuji and Jake the Snake.

"It's the music that gets UB40 across; across the FM and the AM, into carparks, train stations, airports and lifts — that's what I'd like to see happen."

"America's behind the rest of the world as far as music goes, although when things do happen it tends to last much longer in the States. We come over here and see our mates from bands like Level 42, and before

album because it would have saved a lot of talking. People say, you come from Birmingham but reggae's Jamaican, they get confused, but for us there was no choice. We never discussed whether or not we would

be a reggae band. When we were kids we all used to sneak out of our bedrooms and go to reggae house parties around the corner."

Some critics have baulked at the new album; how popular can you get before the music stops being reggae?

"It should never stop being reggae. As long as you can remember how the bass and drums work — that's the backbone to reggae — everything else slots into place. Remember those things and you'll always be a reggae band."

"When Whitney Houston came out she had the face of Nelson Mandela covered. I couldn't believe it. She covered it with a white sheet."

We're a dance band, and as long as people enjoy the music, that's great. Our bonus is when someone knows the words on the record, but I'm not pretending that UB40 talks to the whole world. It's the music that gets us across; across the FM and the AM, in carparks, train stations and airports and lifts — that's what I'd like to see happen."

In Astro's own words, UB40 have known each other for ages. "We used to go out drinking together, went out to clubs. We all know each other so well that there's no room to get egotistical and shit." But the band are also so close that when things go down, they all go down. Like when bassist Earl Falconer smashed his car earlier this year, killing Ray Falconer. Ray was UB40's manager, and Earl's brother.

Earl suffered his brother's death as well as six months in jail for his part in the accident. It was a tense time. Apart from the ever-present English press snapping at their heels, UB40 had to deal with the loss of a loved one, as well as making a new album and planning an imminent tour. For the first part of their US tour, UB40 brought in Laroy Bushell to play bass. Now Earl has rejoined the band, and

Astro and the rest of the band are very happy to have him back.

"Earl's three doors away from me now. He joined us three weeks ago, it doesn't seem that long ago. He's settling in fine. It's weird for him, knowing that Laroy was out front but he's getting right, we're helping him on."

"Working on the new album was difficult. Because we cared for Ray that much ... we'd be writing lyrics and find we couldn't go on, just had to stop ... which is why the album took months to happen. But Earl's back."

We've added a couple more bandmembers for the shows, but the band's the same. We're back at maximum damage now."

The last time we saw UB40 "live" in NZ was on the Nelson Mandela concert at Wembley Stadium. Playing at the concert was good, watching it in the USA was not.

"In America they edited it all down, called it a Freedom Fest and didn't mention Nelson Mandela once. And when Whitney Houston came out she had the backdrop, the face of Nelson Mandela covered. I couldn't believe it. She covered it with a white sheet."

We saw the concert two months late in NZ, but it wasn't censored.

"It wasn't? I'm impressed — good for you! Some friends of mine in America video'd the whole thing and it was like watching a Disney movie. It kept skipping from one artist to another. When someone started to talk about Nelson Mandela they automatically switched the camera shot to an overhead view of the stadium. But the ultimate was Whitney Houston and her white backdrop. If she didn't agree with Nelson Mandela's thinking, she should have stayed away. I've got no

respect for that woman."

What was the show like backstage?

"Great. The moment we said we'd do the show, I didn't for one second think that Pic Botha was going to listen to what we'd say and say, 'Okay, we'll change the system!' But to be there on the day, it was so great ..." Astro pauses. "To call it a *Freedom Fest* ... to the American general public it was no more than a few hours of entertainment. But, there you go."

Do you get more or less concerned about politics as you move on?

"More concerned, but the thing is, we've never considered ourselves to be a political band and the rest of the world has. It's just so easy for us to sit down and write about things that we see going on in the world around us — so much easier than it is to sit down and write a really, really good love song that doesn't contain words like "oooh yeah baby." You try it one day, try and sit down and write a serious love song that the majority of people can relate to, and you'll find how hard it is! As far as our writing goes, we just do what comes easiest. There's nothing easier than to recount what you've done today; you're not bullshitting anybody, reviewing something you've experienced."

"We've just started to grow up, you see. Five years ago we wouldn't have dreamed of singing a love song. I think we've just matured and realised that there is more to life than singing meaningful songs."

UB40 also boasts the band's second collaboration with Pretender Chrissy Hynde, 'Breakfast In Bed'.

"We weren't jumping on the covers bandwagon," says Astro. After doing 'I Got You Babe' we said we'd do it again. She originally chose this really shitty song called 'Let's Make A Baby', and it was the biggest pile of shit I've heard. So we all said no no no, this is a much better song, ▶

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