

## BEN HARPER



## MUSIC FOR THE FOLK

Ben Harper strolls onto the dimly lit stage at Auckland's Powerstation wearing white trainers, navy Adidas track pants, and a black Real Skateboards T-shirt. His wild afro has been shorn to a more manageable length, and he resembles in looks and stature a young Ted Hawkins. Harper takes his seat and straps on a six-string acoustic guitar. He's a hero to most of the gathered 900 before he even sings a note.

Enthusiastic applause fades to an intense silence as Harper and his three-piece band, the Innocent Criminals, groove delicately into 'Oppression', the opening song on his second album *Fight for Your Mind*. Somewhere along the way, 'Oppression' slides into Bob Marley's 'Get Up Stand Up', and later, Marvin Gaye's 'Sexual Healing' gets seductively reggaefied. With a choice

of five guitars, Harper rises and selects his favourite, an antique lap slide Weissenborn, for the poignant 'Don't Take That Attitude to Your Grave', before offering the marijuana ballad 'Burn One Down' to an audience completely hypnotised by this masterful display. After spirited bass and percussion solos, an epic encore of the rootsy 'Gold to Me' and a friendly wave signal the end of

a lightning New Zealand visit that saw Harper in the country for less than 48 hours.

Arriving in Auckland the afternoon of the day before the concert, the Californian-born Harper performed live on Max TV and campus station bFM, and negotiated a series of print interviews in a bar at DeBrett's Hotel, where he and the Innocent Criminals were staying. These media commitments, and the blink-and-you'll-miss-it nature of the stopover, left Harper no time to indulge his other passion.

"Nope, no skateboarding here at all, but that's okay, 'cause it's one thing to skate all day and then go home and watch TV, but it's another thing to skate all day, then go play a gig. Skating takes as much energy as a show, it's like doing two shows in one day."

Growing up in the Pomon district, just outside of Los Angeles, Harper's love for skating developed in tandem with his interest in music. In addition to there always being an acoustic guitar within reach at home, the voices of Otis Redding, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin and Dolly Parton "shook the walls" at Harper's grandparents' music store where he worked in the evenings while during the day, the sounds of pioneering hip-hop artists Kurtis Blow and Run DMC were a favourite of the troublesome neighbourhood gang he was skating with. Bored at school, Harper gradually spent more time on the streets, soon discovering stealing and mugging were vastly more profitable than a part time job polishing guitars. It was a turbulent lifestyle Harper says he was fortunate to escape from.

"I used to do some real stupid shit in my teens, but I eventually got myself out of that scene by exploring more music, it was like a form of guidance. What was coming around at the time I was really fucking up was a lot of conscious hip hop, and also, I was getting back into folk music and getting back into roots music. I wanted to express musically what I was feeling, so I had some choices to make. It was a lot of work trying to write songs, but I just kept playing and playing and playing, and picking up things and learning, and the music just really grabbed a hold."

Midway through 1993, a month or so prior to Harper's twenty-fourth birthday, a friend with industry connections arranged a meeting with two A&R representatives from Virgin Records for him. At that point Harper had no studio experience, and therefore, no demo tapes styled to impress. He travelled to the label's Beverly Hills headquarters carrying his guitar, then... "played a few tunes and got signed"... and Virgin released *Welcome to the Cruel World* in February the following year. Immediately Harper discovered his righteous lyrics and transcending blend of soul, folk, blues, reggae and pop was causing problems for the inflexible executives at the record company.

"When I first started out, no one at Virgin got it. They were like: 'The kids won't understand this, we want to market it to Bonnie Raitt and Bob Dylan's audience.' Fuck that! I'm speaking to my generation and my generation is speaking to me. You see, a lot of people in the decision making process within the music industry are very non-musical. What I'm doing is not music that has been, it's the music of now — a lot of people didn't get that."

Further confusion reigned when Harper toured outside of California to promote the album. Here was a black man from LA who was choosing to sing and play guitar, rather than rap. Harper says some audiences would get rowdy upon realising he wasn't what they'd expected and paid to see.

"I found that a lot and still do, and it sickens me because it's a prejudice. There is so many different musics coming out of LA besides hip-hop. There's a whole community of traditional African drummers and dancers, there's a whole blues/jazz circuit happening, there's many others. But to answer the question, why don't you rap? Simple, I want to sing."

"I don't have anything against rap music, and I don't believe in the negative term 'gangsta rap', these are just people who are exploiting their circumstances to get ahead. If you've been shouted at all your life, you're going to get on record and shout, so I understand the shouting. That said, where a man has been doesn't have to mean where a man is bound. A negative message is gone, it's gone tomorrow; a positive message can be eternal, and a positive voice can be eternal."

Harper cites Marley and Gaye as obvious examples, but notes the lack of any significantly successful, socially conscious artists in the field of urban music since their deaths in the early 80s.

"There definitely has been a gap in, quote-unquote, major commercial music for a positive voice for humanity. Marvin Gaye and Bob Marley were the last large, heard voices of social change, and not only were they the last voices, they were the last two people who actually lived it. I'm not saying shit wasn't being talked about, because the hip-hop nation was documenting what was happening on the street, but it wasn't being commercially exploited on a massive scale, and so, wasn't being heard widespread."

Ultimately, it's that audience of millions that Harper is seeking to switch on. His wish is his music will do nothing less than affect an entire generation on a global level. And with like-minded songwriters such as Michael Franti of Spearhead, and former Arrested Development main man Speech gaining notoriety, the old road is rapidly changing, insists Harper.

"This is a musical revolution that is going on right now. We're going to start it, and we're going to get music to the people. Music with a world understanding and comprehension, that can move people's minds and hearts. And it's not going to be called anything, it's just music for the people of the time, music for the folk."

Harper is right now taking his quest from coast to coast across North America, before he returns home to Los Angeles, to settle and write a third album full of song titles that speak for themselves, and focus on his great expectations of permanent stardom... or not.

"I aspire to great levels, if you don't aspire to greatness it won't be reached. My ambitions are beyond the Beatles for that matter, but I'm also a realist, and I also keep my feet on the ground. My only true mission is that I want to bring something to the earth with my life, and not take from the earth. I don't want to die having taken more than I've brought, so I'm going to sing."

JOHN RUSSELL

## MUCKHOLE



# HAVE A GO

Good things may come to those who wait, but life has been undeniably charming for Auckland hardcore outfit Muckhole since they emerged from the practice room to play their first public show early last year.

Originating on the North Shore, Muckhole chose a route familiar to many young bands breaking their first guitar strings and drumsticks. A history of performing covers at parties developed into informal jam sessions where a handful of originals were knocked out, before Sean (vocals), Aaron (bass), Scott (guitar), and new arrival Jason (drums) got serious, and spent six months rehearsing a set of furiously fast pop songs.

Muckhole made their debut at Bob in January 1995, and within a year their reputation as a consistently ballistic live act had secured them support slots for Pumpkinhead and Head Like a Hole, and a release on the Wildside label, who issued the 'Overdrive' cassette just prior to Christmas. Muckhole's excellent fortune continued into the New Year. After a solid *Big Day Out* appearance, they opened for USA trio Green Day at their one New Zealand concert in February, and this month release the four-song CD EP *Where's the Corndogs?* on Wildside off-shoot Felix. The timing of everything has been perfect, says Sean.

"Everything has happened fast, it's been one thing after another, bang, bang, bang, but we couldn't handle it happening any other way."

"We're all quite impatient people in terms of wanting to get things done. I think it's got a lot to do with believing in yourself as well, like everything's pretty new to us, being in a studio and playing gigs, but because of the responses from what we've recorded and the gigs we've done, it's been quite easy to believe we've got some good stuff going."

Indeed. On record Muckhole offer an irresistibly catchy collection of pop soaked hardcore tunes, and live, their intense pace and energy defies you to keep both feet on the ground. Seans says that's the desired response — they write to make people jump.

"I think the biggest emphasis in Muckhole is on melody, aggressive music with melody, something you can really charge to, that gets you up."

Though *Where's the Corndogs?* is just out in the shops, Muckhole are already looking ahead. There's an album's worth of songs nearing completion, and the band are hoping their luck will continue to spiral out of control.

"We'd definitely like to have a go, whatever 'having a go' means. Everything's happened the way we've wanted up till now, so we're just staying with the flow."

JOHN RUSSELL