

PERSONAL BLESSINGS

Paul Ubana Jones

On a beautiful Sunday afternoon in mid-September, Paul Ubana Jones sits in the outside courtyard of the Atomic Cafe on Auckland's Ponsonby Road, sipping a latte. Jones is up from Dunedin for the weekend for interviews and to perform on TV2's *Good Morning* show, all to promote his recently released fourth album, *Blessings and Burdens*.

Three weeks earlier, Jones packed the Atomic to overflowing on the final leg of the *Blessings and Burdens* album tour. And having driven 3500km to play 13 dates with only one night off, he describes the journey as, "hefty and demanding." On the upside, Jones was thrilled to witness his audience expanding.

"I'm seeing guys and ladies who might not have seen me two years ago 'cause they were too young to get into a venue. Invariably, people at my gigs range from 19/20-ish, up to my age, 45, and people in their early 50s, who have been seeing me for 10 years. I like that, the music seems to transcend those frontiers of age, as music should do if it can, rather than make people too old for this or that, or too young."

Blessings and Burdens was recorded in less than a week, in Auckland, last May. As producer Trevor Reekie notes, "Killing an album from blank tape to mix down in four days and four nights in this day and age is very rare." Perhaps due to the intensity of the sessions, and certainly because of songs like 'Looking For Your Love' and 'The River in Me', *Blessings* seems more personal and reflective than anything Jones has recorded previously. He describes the album as, "a true representation of Paul Ubana Jones and you can't really do more than that." And where's he headed on the next one?

"Ohh, it's gonna be really 'eavy eh! [laughter]..."

I wanna show Ben Harper I've been doing all that stuff for years [laughter]. He's done well, it must be because he looks 30 kilos lighter than me!"

Unintentionally, the man makes a good point. Jones is a magical performer, whose last album, *A Change of Season*, is available in 13 countries across Europe, where he toured three times last year. After a decade long, four album career in this country, he remains almost a cult figure. Does Jones feel underrated in New Zealand?

"I feel unrespected. If appreciation takes a wider step that would be great, if I can retain just what I'm doing. It's been like this for 23 years for me, in different ways, in France, and Switzerland, and the States. But that's alright, because I'm still doing what I do with no compromises, and that's something I cherish."

If you've experienced Jones live, you know the drill; a baggy shirt, even baggier trousers, the wild 'fro, and his eyes rolling back when the beautiful music hits. Jones on stage, is utterly spellbinding, and he makes each performance unique.

"You might go somewhere and do the same program that you've done six months ago, but you can create a totally different atmosphere by the mere fact of playing the songs differently. It's not format stuff — here's a song, A to Z, and that's how you do it every night — I don't work like that."

Describe the feeling, when you're totally immersed in a song...

"You actually feel like you're not in yourself anymore, you're outside, viewing yourself like the audience are viewing you as the performer. A lot of things come into being, you feel like there's a whole spiritual background there with you. When I play, I think a lot of my parents in my subconscious, and then it rises and they're very much with me. It becomes more than the subconscious, it's something that's very much alive. All these things come into play, that might not have any dimension or form, and if the plan's all working it's almost god-like within one's self. There's such a harmonic resonance, it's incredible."

That's a rare gift that few performers have...

"It really depends on who you believe you are as the artist, as the songwriter, as the guitarist — it's where you see your place in the scheme of things. When I was eight I was listening to music, and when I was 11, I was starting to see my first gigs of people of worth, like Dylan, and the Animals, and Muddy Waters, and it was such a powerful, awesome experience. As I grew older, it was very apparent that some things aren't generated by success or money, some things are generated by completely different things. If one can put that across it's good, some people don't want to put that across, they want to put success across, that they've sold millions of albums, that's what they're after. I've known clearly what

I've been after all my life in music, and that's what I'm trying to generate."

Are you getting there?

"I'm getting closer [laughter], there's another 20 odd years of performance. I've a lot of different personal projects, places I'd like to take my writing, but the well from which I take my ability to convey remains the same."

Would you like more success?

"I'm not trying to achieve success. I've been a success for a long time on all those personal levels — the reasons why I wanted to do music, it's all happened. If by good fortune I become a bigger success and don't have to change anything and I'm not expected to, then so be it."

JOHN RUSSELL



Three years ago, when a South Auckland compilation called *Proud* hit the streets, that region was championed as fostering a simmering underground of Polynesian musical talent, that was itching to explode. Out of that scene came Pauly Fuemana's OMC and a million selling single worldwide. And before that, Sisters Underground, who scored a hit in New Zealand and Australia with 'In the Neighbourhood'. After a period of relative quiet, there's serious rumblings from the South once again, in the form of hip hop group, Lost Tribe.

Urban Pacifika, the indie label run by Phil Fuemana (a key player behind *Proud*), released Lost Tribe's debut single 'Summer in the Winter' last month, and watched as it entered the local charts in the Top 20. This early success was a welcome confidence booster for the group, explains rapper Danny Leaosavaii.

"It was good for us, because with 'Summer in the Winter' there was no compromise, we did it the way we wanted it, so it's a blessing to know that a lot of people appreciated our music."

Lost Tribe formed 18 months ago out of the ashes of the Pacifican Descendants. Their arrival coincided with the emergence of Urban Pacifika, and the two entities immediately joined forces as they shared similar goals.

"It's all about us as Polynesians, expressing ourselves, and we can do that through the label," says Leaosavaii. "We want to say our piece about our lives in Aotearoa, telling our stories as Polynesians the way we see it. Lost Tribe is all about trying to reach our young ones, and we are trying to get ourselves into a position where we can deliver our message out to the kids."

Without question, and like all local hip hop crews, Lost Tribe have a battle on their hands to bend the ears of young hip hop fans in this country, who are bombarded through video shows and radio with bland Stateside R&B. Leaosavaii points out the single biggest hurdle facing indigenous hip hop is the narrow minded attitudes of TV and radio programmers.

"It's vital for the kids to hear what we have to offer, there's so much happening here, but we're getting blocked off. The people with the power to expose our music need to feed us to the young ones so they at least have the option to choose either the American stuff or ours. I know that if kids here listen to our rhymes, they'll realise that we have a message that is more relevant to them than what the Americans have to say."

And no longer can it be argued, says Leaosavaii, that "Aotearoa styles" don't make the grade; "Local hip hop has gone beyond being compared to the Americans. Guys like DLT, Che Fu, and Dam Native, have proven that we have our own voice."

Coupled with an absence of airplay, NZ hip hop is also hindered by a lack of rolling momentum. Few of the higher profile groups release records in quick succession, and therefore are unable to build on existing popularity. Lost Tribe plan to reverse that trend by knocking out a second single in November, and an album early in the new year.

"If we had our way we'd be turning music out every week, and I wish those decisions could be made by us, but there's other channels we have to go through. Our biggest goal at the moment is to drop an album, that's a big stepping stone for any hip hop group. If local hip hop groups could be dropping music regularly, the kids would react to it, and there would be a constant vibe happening. It could only be good for everyone."

JOHN RUSSELL

BASTARD SONS



Some say only sheer stupidity would prompt two Dunedin musicians to relocate to Auckland, then title the resulting album, *City of Bastards*. Others would say Alpha Plan are spot on.

"We called it that for a number of reasons," explains guitarist John Howell. "It appealed to our sense of humour, and also, so many people said, 'don't call it that', they thought it would be a really bad idea."

On the cover of *City of Bastards*, the Sky Tower looms large over a shot of the Auckland CBD, complete with motorway traffic jam. Howell is right when he describes the whole scene as grotesque.

"When I moved up here, I got a bit of a dark obsession with the tower, seeing this monstrosity being erected in front of me. And I was wondering why it was happening because it was so disgusting, but nobody except me seemed offended by it. It's such an ugly piece of architecture that we wanted to put it on the record cover."

In the early 90s, Howell and bassist Victor Billot, were playing in different bands in Dunedin. There was a healthy scene happening, says Howell, "a second wave of Dunedin music". Two years later, it had all but petered out. "We decided to skip town, Dunedin was dying as a place to make music."

Gradually, the duo made it up to Auckland, and then formed Alpha Plan. Late last year they made a connection with Earwig Studios, and went in and recorded *City of Bastards* in three days. A London-based friend, Mark Orbell, who was visiting Auckland that week, played drums. "It was chaos," admits Howell.

Thematically, *City of Bastards*, repeatedly questions the alleged benefits of modern day technological advances, and the values system of

the western world, in general. But, as most of the record was written in the studio, Alpha Plan were far too untethered to produce a concept album, says Howell. Nonetheless, *City of Bastards* does present that way.

"It seems that way now, and the lyrics reflect how Victor and I are and how we see the world, but there was no plan to have a sole angle. Although, lyrically, I think it's really spot on."

And because Alpha Plan have something to say, and a point to make, Howell views *City of Bastards* as unusual within the city that spawned it.

"In Auckland, there's that dumb, leather trousers, morphine scene, which is a bit middle class and a bit ironic for its own good, and it's not saying anything. Then there's the 'la la la' thing, which has always been around, and that doesn't interest us at all either. So, in that way, I think it's quite a unique album, in that we have a purpose for being, other than just wiggling our asses on stage."

An over inflated ego at work? No way. Alpha Plan like a laugh. They called their record, *City of Bastards*, remember?

"When you're performing or doing your music, you should take yourself seriously and believe in what you're doing, but it's pretty funny being in a rock 'n' roll band, and we have an idea of how ludicrous the whole thing can be. Keeping a sense of humour is pretty important to us, we're not prepared to set ourselves up to be sad, defeated pricks in our mid 30s."

JOHN RUSSELL