

A long and deep pedigree in London clubland served Soul II Soul very well in the years when they put British soul on the map, helped them through the wonderful and terrifying experience of being Real Big In America. It also makes them subject to stuff ordinary pop acts don't have to deal with. Everyone who was "there" in the old days owns a piece of them and is duly authorised to declare that Jazzie B has sold out/lost it/flipped his lid. And most of all, Jazzie's business is everyone's business ...

Which makes it all the more odd that I have Jazzie B's home phone number in front of me. All reasonable offers considered. Dial the digits and we get ... the answerphone. That gruff, familiar voice draws out a message before being interrupted by the same gruff, familiar voice: "Ang on mate, be with you in a minute."

Uh-huh. First call of the day. Jazzie comes on the line and grunts in reply to the usual pleasantries. Definitely the first call of the day. His baby daughter is howling in the background — it doesn't seem opportune to ask about fatherhood right now. Okay, the difficult third album, *Just Right*, apart from being a firm return to a British club fusion is also a band album, a first for Soul II Soul.

"Yeah. Having been on tour and working with a band, I was able to incorporate a lot of those techniques. With the musicians there were quite a lot of, y'know, personal touches going in and out of each track. It's not the tour band, though, just musicians I'd worked with during that time. We also spent a lot of time on vocal arrangements."

One thing it doesn't sound like is a contemporary reggae sound system.

"Heh, heh, heh ..."

Do you like reggae's direction — the dancehall thing?

"It's great y'know, it's a good thing. It's gotta keep on moving for it to stay alive."

The album was recorded at the new Soul II Soul studio in Camden. Would you like to see it become like one the great studios that rose out of sound systems? Treasure Isle and the rest?

"I think it is already. It's quite a big place and there's a lot of different artists that pass through, particularly reggae artists. American people come over. So yeah, it's a bit of a monument. We've got a house band — it's the same guys I'm gonna be going out on the road with."

So that first tour wasn't really the last tour?

"Nah ... I got persuaded ..."

Kofi, after years of making sweet dancehall records for Ariwa, sounds like she was just waiting to cross over. Her ver-

sion of the much covered (notably by Barry White and the Love Unlimited Orchestra) 'Move Me No Mountain' is brilliant, maybe the best thing on *Just Right*. She's just released her first single on Funki Dred records, 'Step By Step'. But was there any bad blood with the Ariwa posse when she moved on over?

"Not as far as I know. She'd finished her term with Ariwa and she wanted to make a move, so she figured this was the next step, know what I mean? There's been no animosity between the two camps."

And what happened to Nellee Hooper, supposed backroom genius, this time round?

"Nellee? 'E's on 'oliday, innie?" Jazzie chuckles. "No, on this particular album what happened was that we both had some different ideas in mind and after the tour Nellee was caught up working on so many different other projects. We're still very much in touch, but when I did the pre-production stages of this album, it took a different direction than what we anticipated. So ... I just finished it off."

So what went different?

"Well, y'know, for every album that we've made to date, you make so many songs then move on to another thing. Some of these tracks are left over from the second album, working together. And now Nellee's doing things like the Sugarbubs, where I'm doing stuff like, erm ... James Brown and more kind of R&B stuff ..."

Whoah. James Brown?

"I'm doing tracks for his album and stuff. It's a little way away yet, because of his scheduling. I've just done some tracks for Curiosity and I've finished off some for Caron Wheeler."

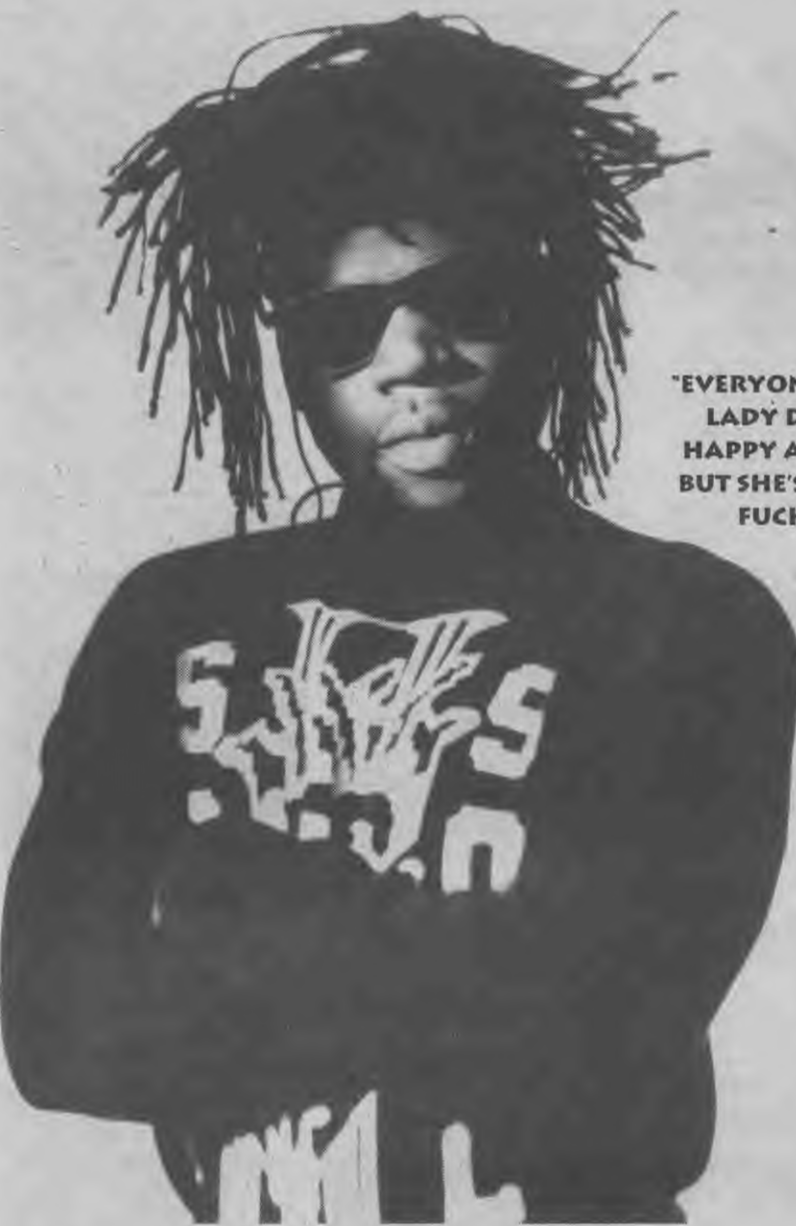
Who returned to the fold for one track on *Just Right*. What did you think of her solo album, *UK Blak*?

"Interesting concept ..." he draws in a distinctly sarky mock-American accent. "Kinda interesting ..."

Soul II Soul's a collective and all that, but did she have to leave the bounds to make a personal statement like that?

"It's more like a vehicle for a lot of artists, like Caron and so forth, they have the opportunity

SOULTRAIN



"EVERYONE THINKS LADY DI'S SO UNHAPPY AND THAT, BUT SHE'S 'AVING A FUCKIN' BALL!'"

of surfacing and then taking off from there. By no means is it, like, right, we've finished with you, move on to the next one. It's all the same kinda vibe. It's really important, especially at this stage of our career."

So what about the rumours, then? When I left London a year ago, the word was that you'd lost the plot, no one could communicate with you and so on.

"I really didn't know about that bit! I've heard worse things than that, though. People think Michael Jackson's mad, don't they?"

Do you ever feel there's gossip about everything you do?

"I'll be honest with you mate — in the area where I grew up it was common. So you just cannot afford to pay attention to it or you can't get on with your life. Even the neighbours now still gossip about the people who walk in and out of me 'ouse. I'm accustomed to it. It's better that way, 'cause less people know your business then, they're always assuming, y'see. So it's pretty cool."

I read an interview with Shut Up & Dance where they said it was a very West Indian trait to not tell everyone your business — is that true?

"I guess so ... leave it for people to assume! I don't think it's

necessarily a West Indian thing, I think it's most people's idea. Everyone thinks Lady Di's so unhappy and that, but she's 'aving a fuckin' ball!"

After talking about not talking about your business we move on to talk about ... business. And Soul II Soul's as much a business as anything else. Jazzie's been organising the band, working in the studio, choosing production crews and remixers. The core of the organisation now numbers 12, each one delegated to take care of various aspects of the business — the shops, the studio, the record label and so on. So how many people are out

there in the wider organisation? "Fuck knows. Let's say, loadsa geezers."

It's a black business success. Jazzie professes to be startled by his success, which seems disingenuous when you recall things like the *Face* interview in 1988, which painted a picture of The Man With A Plan.

"I guess that was just a good writer. It's just one stage and then the next and when it reaches a certain level you just try and maintain it, not go too far, not bite off more than you can chew. Success is in the eye of the beholder anyway. Back when we was doin' those parties, it was very successful then, for it to have gone on as long as it did."

There's a very strong emphasis on ambition on this album — but surely not every black kid can do what you've done?

"No, but if there's that inner belief there, that somebody else can do it, you can do it. That friction's good, it's a healthy thing."

Are there other ways of being successful, that don't necessarily involve a BMW and a mobile phone?

"I ain't got a BMW ... I have got a mobile phone."

I wasn't necessarily ...

"Of course. There's loads of ways. You can be a drug dealer, you can be a gangster, you can be an admin person, you can try and be a politician, a sportsman, a model — it's up to you. But at the end of the day a lotta things came out of the early 80s club culture and socially it made a big difference to all our lives, we grew up over that time. Now you've got Soul II Soul, Normski, The Young Disciples, Galliano, Omar — right on to Davina doin' the weather on TV and The Real McCoy [a black comedy company], who've just got a new series."

Club culture matters. Jazzie still does his show on the general pirate station KISS FM and he still plays live, DJing Friday nights at a club called The Fish.

"I'll slave to do club nights, I love it. I stopped doing it for a year, but it's just something I enjoy doing. But in terms of the importance of keeping your ear to the ground, and the street thing, it's a load of bollocks, y'know what I mean? You can put yourself in whatever kinda position you want to, but at the end of the day it's other people who go around saying, oh he ain't street, he ain't this or that. What is it? What's fuckin' street? I've never understood it when people say 'yeah, I'm street, man'. What the fuck is it?"

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- 3 3 Sonic Youth • 100%
- 4 6 Morrisey • You're Gonna Need Someone On Your Side
- 5 10 Utah Saints • Something Good
- 6 9 COW • Heave Ho
- 7 7 Soundgarden • Girl U Want
- 8 4 Bailter Space • Unssen
- 9 - Beastie Boys • Pass the Mic
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