

## CAMPBELL'S SONIC SOUP

Ali Campbell has moved on from the days of UB40 and now performs dub live with The Dep band. He talks to **Nui Te Koha**

Former UB40 frontman Ali Campbell is under no illusion about where they come from.

"Way back, we weren't even a band," Campbell says. "We were all unemployed."

Even the name UB40 comes from an unemployment benefits form in the UK and the band's debut album *Signing Off* (1980) refers to that process at the end of the dole queue.

It was a reflection of the times, and of Thatcher's Britain, and *Signing Off* became a classic reggae and dub platter, recognised for its scathing political bite and socially conscious heart.

"We were painted very much as dour people crying into our beer, which wasn't true," Campbell says. "Our songs were political and, yes, we were vitriolic, but we had a lot to say."

"But, at the end of the day, we moaned about the same six things everybody moans about. I'm still moaning about them today. But we felt obliged to say something."

Sonically, *Signing Off* was a proper reggae album with big dub elements. Often, vocals and riddims would drop out of the mix, or pass through an echo deck.

UB40's second album, *Present Arms*, with the hit single *One in Ten*, was also released as a dub record, *Present Arms in Dub*.

"It was the first dub album to get into the pop charts," Campbell says. "But at the time, a lot of people brought it back and complained that it sounded strange and the vocals were missing."

Today, Campbell and his new collective, The Dep band, perform dub live. "To play dub is a seriously difficult thing to do. It's terrifying, actually," he says. "To be a live band, strip it down and just leave drum and bass – everyone on stage feels like they should be doing something – but dub is about not doing something."

Campbell left UB40 four years ago after 30 years of service and 70 million record sales. He was unhappy with management practices and launched a probe into the financial handling of the business.

Asked what his investigation revealed, Campbell sighs: "I still haven't got what I wanted. I was just trying to get clarity on certain things, disclosure of documents."

"I'm too bored with it to go any further. It was a crap part of my life. It was like getting divorced. I'm happy now with my new band."

Today, Campbell hears a reggae sheen from most artists in the pop chart, from Bruno Mars to Olly Murs to JLo.

"All contemporary music has permutations of dub and reggae. But it's time for a more serious reggae now. It's getting too hybrid poppy."



**Playing dub** is a seriously difficult thing to do, says Ali Campbell.

## NOEL FREE AS A BIRD

The eldest Gallagher brother performs today at the Big Day Out on the Gold Coast with his new band, High Flying Birds. **Sally Browne** caught up with the former Oasis superstar

**N**oel Gallagher laughs loudly. He's quite amused by the idea that High Flying Birds, the name he has given his solo project since quitting Oasis two years ago, might be a metaphor – something about feeling "untethered" or "free".

The truth is much more prosaic. "Do you want the actual truth?" he says. Well, yes, we are in the business of reporting the truth.

"I was going out, I was passing a theatre one night, Shepherd's Bush Empire, you would have been there, it's full of Australians."

"And I can't remember whose name was up in lights, but I thought to myself, can I see my name up in lights? And I decided that I couldn't."

"It was like, Noel Gallagher, it's hardly *Ziggy Stardust* is it?"

Perhaps Noel Gallagher is more of a name suited to a brickie's labourer from Manchester than the key songwriter of one of the biggest bands of the past 20 years. Still, it's not the sort of self-effacing answer that you'd expect from one of rock 'n' roll's famously big egos.

But that's not the end of the story. Gallagher never thought anything of the experience until weeks later when he was listening to Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac on the radio (that's before Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham joined). "I thought, 'Oh, wouldn't it be good if I was called Noel Gallagher's something'." Later he heard the

Jefferson Airplane song *High Flying Bird* and everything fell into place. Now Noel Gallagher's High Flying Birds, with one album under their wing, are in Australia for The Big Day Out, kicking off today on the Gold Coast.

As a key member of Oasis, he's used to writing great tunes and performing for a lively crowd. But this time there will be one major difference. He'll be standing front and centre of the stage, a spot usually occupied by his brother Liam.

"I thought I'd be a lot less comfortable with it than I am," he says. "I'm here to perform an album of songs that I wrote and I can do that well. (But) if anyone's coming along to see anything else like juggling, or disco dancing, or fire-eating, or wisecracks, or all that Mick Jagger stuff, then don't bother. If you're coming along to sing and clap really loud and reassure me of my brilliance, then we're all going to have a great night out."

Phew. Gallagher's sense of humour and ego are firmly in check. It's a welcome return of the sharp-tongued troubadour since he left Oasis abruptly one night in Paris in 2009. Noel simply had had enough of his younger brother's behaviour and walked. Their disagreements and brotherly banter are legendary, but now only their lawyers are speaking.

After Noel walked, the rest of the band regrouped to form Beady Eye, releasing their debut album last year. Noel is still in touch with other

### WIN

*U on Sunday* is offering readers the chance to win one of 10 double-passes to performances by Ali Campbell, Billy Ocean and Big Mountain at the Brisbane Riverstage on Australia Day 2012. To enter, email your name, address, postcode and contact phone number to [competitions@thesundaymail.com.au](mailto:competitions@thesundaymail.com.au) with REGGAE in the subject line. Total prize pool value \$2400.

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band members and plans to see them after his tour. Some might ask not why did Noel leave Oasis, but how did he stay for so long? "Why did it take so long? Because I enjoyed it. I loved it in that group," he says.

"You don't leave a band lightly just on a whim. Because once you leave there's no going back. I knew that once I left, the band would die. I didn't want to be the person who killed it but I had to be. Circumstances became out of control."

*High Flying Birds* is the kind of record you'd hope to hear from Noel Gallagher.

But wait until you hear the next record. While working on his debut, the prolific 44-year-old had another in the works, which he describes as space jazz, vaudeville and kraut rock.

You'll have to wait a while because Noel's still waiting for his collaborators, the Amorphous Androgynous, to be finished with it.

"It was all supposed to be finished before my tour. Hopefully it will be out at the start of 2013. But saying that, those F-ing Mayans told us the world is going to end at the end of the year, so who knows, it may never see the light of day."

The past year has been a big one for Gallagher. Not only did he release an album, his partner, former publicist Sara MacDonald, gave birth to his third child, he moved house, and in June he finally tied the knot with Sara.

The pair have been together for 11 years. "She's a great

girl. She's my best friend," Gallagher says candidly. "I've never been on a night out without Sara. She's one of maybe six people in the world that I would have to have there on a night out – not for any other reason than she's a right good laugh, and because I don't have to explain to her what went on when I come in in the morning."

Sara announced she was pregnant with their son the night Noel started working on the new album.

"And he's a beauty, he's a good lad," his dad says.

So how was moving house? Gallagher says he "took the coward's way out" and went to LA to work on his album while his wife and a friend did the hard work.

When he came home "it was like *Extreme Makeover*".

"Apart from the fact there was none of my gear anywhere. So I went round and rubbed myself on the furniture like a little cat."

Another new thing for Noel is that the self-confessed Luddite finally got a computer. But, he says, the salespeople could see him coming a mile off and sold him a machine he could "design a weapons program on".

It was Mr Job's iPad that changed his life. "Someone said, why don't you get an iPad? And I said, what's one of those? And since I got the iPad I don't even turn the computer on. It's revolutionised my life."

But he steers clear of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

"My wife's on Facebook and she's got friends. I've got enough friends, thank you very much. I've got six or seven, and I'm trying to get rid of one of those."

Gallagher doesn't need to say pithy things online – he can just say them out loud and a quote-hungry press will be quick to report them.

He agrees that many of today's youth are obsessed with celebrity for its own sake. Everybody wants their 15 minutes.

Growing up in the working-class suburbs of Manchester, the eldest Gallagher never dreamed of becoming famous. He was never one, as he noted at the start of this interview, to imagine his name up in lights. Even when he was listening to the Beatles and lugging gear as a roadie for then-successful British band the Inspiral Carpets he never imagined he'd one day be in one of the biggest bands around. Then he joined his little brother's band and the rest is history.

"I was never a stand-in-front-of-the-mirror-with-a-tennis-racket kind of guy.

"People like me didn't become rock stars. It wasn't even a thought at the back of my mind.

"It was a gradual progression. There was a guitar at home, I don't know why but it was there and I learned to play one string at a time. I learned to play *House of the Rising Sun* (by the Animals) and I learned to copy my idols on *Top of the Pops*. It wasn't like I came out of the womb and my first words were 'rock 'n' roll'."

Does he remember the first song he wrote?

"I know it would have been s---. I can recall it being a little bit like *His Latest Flame* by Elvis Presley. And it would have been about a girl. Aren't they all?"

How about the last song he wrote?

"I'm actually writing one this very second," he

declares, "well, not as we're speaking but I had the guitar in my hand before you rang.

"But the last great song I wrote, you'll get to hear soon enough. It's pretty good, I've got to say.

"I'll tell you how good it is, right. After I'd written this stuff for this *High Flying Birds* album I thought, I don't ever think I'll ever write a song like *What a Life* or *If I Had a Gun* again, because they're just so good. And about four weeks later I did.

"And I gave myself a little pat on the back and a pay rise."

Ego – check. Ready to go. Rock 'n' roll.

Noel Gallagher's *High Flying Birds* perform at the Big Day Out on the Gold Coast today. For a special feature on renowned rock photographer Tony Mott's best pictures from 20 years of the Big Day Out go to [uonsunday.com.au](http://uonsunday.com.au) on Wednesday.

If anyone's coming along to see anything else like juggling, or disco dancing... then don't bother

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