



the spirit within

Spirited and provocative as ever, Faithless return with a new album and UK tour. Maxi Jazz and Sister Bliss talk about music, politics and world poverty

by **matt chittock**

'Looking for the truth in a fucked-up society can be a very lonely and thankless task. The system has always been rigged in favour of the rich and powerful. If you think about it, the whole of the Western world is built on greed, gangsterism and piracy, so there isn't a good role model for anyone to aspire to. Our political leaders like to peddle the myth that you can improve the lot of the poorest without challenging the powerful. Well, no, actually. History tells us otherwise.'

Read cold it'd be safe to assume that the above quote has come from some fresh bunch of guitar-toting scruffs looking to put the world to rights and stir up some controversy for their first single. So it's all the more surprising that the words emanate from the lips of Maxi Jazz, charismatic 40-something leader of a global dance act who, with five studio albums and a million-selling greatest hits collection under their belt, hardly need to rock the boat. Still, rocking the boat is all part of Faithless' appeal.

In many ways, they're a Socialist Worker Party member's dream of a band. Born out of the communal ethos of late-Eighties English ecstasy culture and inspired by a collective misspent youth protesting 'against cruise missiles and Mrs Thatcher generally', they've used their widespread appeal to continually speak out against the Iraq occupation, support Aids and animal-rights organisations and criticise hip hop's love affair with bling.

On the eve of the MOBO awards, while most of hip hop (and the media in general) chose to look the other way, Maxi attacked the hip-hop world's addiction to conflict diamonds, stating in a searing editorial for *The Guardian* that, 'While we continue to display and glorify our childish lack of self-esteem by adorning our bodies with things that others can't afford, then children, mothers and fathers continue to be slaughtered.'

This passion for the political continues to inform Faithless' new record, *To All New Arrivals*, a title inspired by both the journey of Maxi's immigrant parents from Jamaica

to England and the recent birth of Sister Bliss' son. The core trio of vocalist Maxi, keyboardist Sister Bliss and producer Rollo have created a thoughtful, provocative album, a more meditative take on the club-friendly Faithless sound. It features tracks that ponder the big questions of 2007, from the possibility of ecological meltdown and world poverty to the complex reality of international terrorism. 'What I always try to do is attack people's hearts, because your heart is your most powerful organ. I want people to stop, look, see and think,' Maxi explains.

On the latest album a prime example of this direct approach is *Bombs*, an attempt to make the listener understand the motivations of a terrorist by getting inside the mind of a would-be suicide bomber. This level of empathy isn't surprising coming from a practicing Buddhist, albeit one with a love of fast sports cars.

'Buddhism informs everything that I do,' says Maxi, 'It's completely changed my perspective. Just as it's impossible to be sad without sadness, it's impossible to feel brilliant without actually tapping into your own brilliance.'

As usual for a Faithless album there's a wealth of collaborations including input from indie darling Cat Power and the Cure's Robert Smith. 'Smith has always been a big

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hero of Rollo's,' says Maxi. 'He's loved the Cure since he was a kid and he's always loved the song *Lullaby*. So, when he sampled it and we did the track (which ended up as *Spiders, Crocodiles and Kryptonite*), he sent it to Smith. He apparently liked it and when Rollo asked him to sing on it he said yes.'

Whatever childhood heroes they bring into the fold, it's the live experience that continues to be vital to the band. Maxi's formidable Southern Baptist preacher vocal delivery and Sister Bliss's hypnotic beats have made them one of those rare beasts: a dance act who can actually play live.

Sister Bliss sees their live experiences as being a continuation of the UK rave

movement. 'It's the thing that people crave at raves, the thing that we trekked around the M25 to find. We weren't just looking for great DJs and great music – it was a sense of people coming together. Very primal, a quite beautiful feeling at its best.'

Bliss believes she started to sense a sea change in the culture at large through their audience when the New Labour dream began to turn sour. 'There is a goodness

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about consensus politics; to try to do the best by as many people as possible,' she says. 'But the Labour Party has become snared in its own bloated ego and has forgotten it was elected by the electorate.'

Faithless' heady mix of inclusion and self-determination has never been popular with bandwagon-chasing critics, many of whom expressed surprise that the band returned to the studio after their greatest hits was released. Even among fans, their last UK tour was interpreted as a farewell to the music industry. 'The final tour stuff, I don't know where that all came from,' shrugs Maxi. 'Those were only rumours. We're gonna stop touring so extensively, but it has never been a fact that we stop making albums or doing shows.'

This may be fighting talk from the Faithless camp, but how much have they got left to prove? For the original wide-eyed ravers, the ecstasy journey has ended in kids, mortgages and steady jobs, while the younger generation appears to be more into angular guitars and modish electro than mixing party with protest.

Sister Bliss remains characteristically positive. 'There's always more to achieve,' she says. 'Musically it would be great to make our own *Dark Side Of The Moon*, and a bit of world peace wouldn't go amiss.' ***Faithless will be touring the UK in March. See www.faithless.co.uk for dates.*** ✨