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PRESENT:



UNKLEJAM

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They call their music electro-soul. Like the three very different individuals who make up Unklejam, it's loud, colourful and funky but thoughtful too, with instant pop hooks and a heart full of soul. Listen hard and you'll hear echoes of P-funk, the sweet sound of classic soul mixing with 80s electro-pop, all with an edge that's totally contemporary, immediately commercial, yet oddly hard to place. It doesn't sound like anything else around. Which is exactly the point. "When we set out to make music, it was about being as left of centre as possible," they say proudly. "Because if we didn't, we wouldn't be ourselves."

Tyson 'Tendai' Speede - known to his friends simply as Tyson - grew up in Northolt. His dad is Poko Batsaria, singer with the roots reggae collective Misty-In-Roots. His mum was just 20 when Tyson was born. He grew up in two worlds. His dad told him he should consider himself African, his mother insisted his roots were in Grenada. When his dad was away on tour, his mum would shave off his dreadlocks and drag him to church. In school holidays, however, his dad would take him all over Europe, Africa and the Americas with the band, talking music all the time.

Later, he saved up to buy a PC and software, hoping to lay down some of the music he had in his head. But he didn't know how to use any of his new gear. So he started by copying the more basic beats of electro-pop tunes like Gary Numan's 'Cars' - a record he'd always loved. "I liked that electro vibe, but I couldn't write a straight song over it," he explains. "so I started writing Sam Cooke-type soul songs over this four-to-the-floor beat."

When he played his songs to friends, they didn't get it. They told him he should make tunes like Usher. Tyson replied there was already an Usher. By then he'd learned his craft and could imitate anyone he wanted, but he stubbornly stuck to his own path.

It was at a Secret Garden night, that he came across Bobby. The music was Numan to Nirvana, so they both stood out in the mainly white crowd. And Tyson instantly felt he'd found a singer to work with. "I knew he had to do something," he shrugs. "You're not going to look like Bobby and work in Tesco's." As it happens, he was right.

Bobby Joel Stearns was born in the East End of London but his transatlantic accent tells you he's from somewhere else. He's mixed race, but his natural father left when he was young and his mum married an American who adopted Bobby, making him the odd one out in an otherwise all-white family. When he was two, they all moved to Hawaii for seven years. But the real culture shock came when he was nine and his family moved abruptly back to the UK, first to Bradford, then to Glasgow. Growing up in a predominantly white community in Scotland, Bobby had to create his own identity.

Everywhere they went in the world, Bobby would form groups, sing and perform, but it wasn't until he began working with Tyson that it finally felt right. "It felt like coming home." It was Bobby who persuaded Tyson he should sing, not just be a producer. So they were on the lookout for a third face for the group when later, Adonistar walked into the same club night. In London for the first time, this was his night out in the capital and he was still having trouble understanding the local accent. He saw Bobby, thought he recognised a fellow American, and went over to chat.

And yes, of course he could sing.

Adonistar was almost born in Germany, where his father was stationed with the US Army, but his mum flew back to have her son in the States. After that it's hard to say where he's from because the family lived in army bases from New York to Los Angeles, plus another three-year stint in Germany. Miami was the city they returned to most, the place he considers home.

But Europe was where he really found himself. "I watched *Purple Rain* all the time, then *Under The Cherry Moon*, and that became my favourite movie. It was filmed in France, and it really made me want to go back to Europe. I felt I could express myself more there". When he met a German girl who invited him there, he went immediately, and began singing and touring.

So there you are. Two chance meetings, three men who could hardly be more different yet who each grew up outside conventional society in different ways, travelling everywhere yet belonging nowhere fully. "That's what links us all together, because we were from such different places, we all had to somehow come up with our own individuality," explains Adonistar. "And that's why we fit so well."

The name Unklejam comes from Funkadelic's 1979 album 'Uncle Jam Wants You'. George Clinton's wayward habit of creating his own funk-ed-up universe appealed to a trio trying to forge a fresh musical identity, and they also name innovators like Prince, Gary Numan, Eurythmics, Donny Hathaway, Bob Marley, Sam Cooke and Sly & The Family Stone as influences. They've share great voices and an ear a great tunes with all these artists, but mainly it's an attitude that they have in common: a determination to forge their own path, to make music that expresses how they feel rather than fits into neat pigeonholes.

So for Unklejam, staying true means daring to be different, standing proudly, colourfully away from the crowd. As Tyson says, "How often do you see a geezer from Hawaii, a geezer from Northolt, and a geezer from Miami in a group together, in England?"

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