

INCOGNITO

BIOGRAPHY

The enduring success of Incognito is one of the great stories of UK music during the last 20 years. Look at the recent history of soulful UK artists and you'll find any number of short-lived acts that have achieved pop success. Narrow the list to those that have created a uniquely British sound and that have endured as a global phenomenon on their own terms and the list becomes even shorter. Dues, then, to Jean Paul "Bluey" Maunick and Incognito, formed in 1980 and celebrating 25 years of positive vibes and undiluted jazz funk in 2005.

From an early age, the UK live scene was a key inspiration for Bluey, having moved to London from his native Mauritius at age 10. "Defining music for me? Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye, of course, Santana, Earth Wind & Fire, Kool & The Gang. But the real link to Incognito was UK bands like Gonzalez and FBI. These were people that lived in your town and walked your streets.

"My first band was New Life with David Grant," he remembers, "his cousin later managed Light Of The World. I worked in his record shop in Tottenham and we'd rehearse upstairs. Some of the future Light Of The World musicians would pop in to jam. I switched from bass to guitar when Paul "Tubs" Williams came in, he was only 14 and blew everyone's minds." Spawning a new band, the name Tower Block was changed to the more uplifting Light Of The World and, in 1978, Chris Hill's Ensign imprint promptly signed them. "We ended up at Phonogram Studios and could suddenly buy any piece of equipment we wanted in their shop. No one stopped to think 'I can buy a car!' All we could see were wah wah pedals and phaser units!" The self-titled LOTW debut was a landmark for UK jazz funk featuring extended high energy club hits *Swingin* and *Midnight Groovin*, as well as a young Sade pictured on the cover.

"British jazz funk bands created a scene to an extent but we didn't embrace each other enough," reflects Bluey. "It was about blowing each other off stage. We'd know musicians but didn't like the way certain guys dressed. In the end, punk came along and stopped it in its tracks. In the '70s, there was a healthy live circuit in London. From pubs, you could graduate to the Q Club, Upstairs At Ronnie's. By the early '80s, we relied on DJs like Chris Hill booking a band for weekends. I formed Incognito because I really wanted to take the music to the next level. My vision was to be a producer, a writer, and part of a musical community. As Jocelyn Brown has said, 'We're in the business of music, not the music business.

"I started Incognito with "Tubs". Our first saxman was Ghanaian music star George Lee and the drummer was Jeff Dunn (later with Van Morrison). We invited in keyboardist Peter Hinds and percussionist Gee Bello." Recording again for Ensign, the first Incognito offering was a demo instrumental, *Parisienne Girl*. "On Radio 1, before the news, they played filler music and used *Parisienne Girl*. You'd hear it three or four times a day. Ensign then wanted an album which was all recorded in a few days." The debut Incognito set, JAZZ FUNK, was an instrumental tour de force, with guests numbering Hugh Masekela, hornsmen Peter Segona and Claude Deppa, and legendary Jamaican trombonist Vin Gordon. "I respect the musicians' spirit 100%. With writing and producing, I knew that I could communicate and weed out the good from the bad. It was a lovely exchange and formed the whole ideology behind Incognito."

After a brief foray into pop with *North London Boy*, many of the core Incognito band went separate ways. Paul Williams joined The Team with Gee Bello while Bluey continued writing and producing. "I had a day job but was always writing and spotting people. I discovered 14-year old vocalist Steven Dennis (later re-named Steven Dante) in Hackney. I met and worked with Marcus Miller, producer Steve Harvey, Maxi Priest, George Duke, Caroll Thompson, and others. I did anything to keep my love for music alive. It all helped me to develop as a songwriter.

"In the late '80s, Linn drums and sequencers were standard and I started creating tracks at home," reflects Bluey, "including the main body of the Incognito INSIDE LIFE album. Gilles was about to sign Young Disciples and was looking at where to go next. I had known him from his Radio Invicta days and he came to see us at the Southport Weekender playing *Always There*. Gilles made the connection with Jocelyn Brown for the record. The David Morales remix paved the way for how I'd make music in the future. His version was so simple and, at that point, I embraced all DJs!" With the single and INSIDE LIFE in 1991, Incognito were back.

Besides taking clubland, and the charts, by storm, Incognito unwittingly became smooth jazz heroes in the U.S. With their second Talkin' Loud set, TRIBES, VIBES & SCRIBES, Maysa Leak's vocals graced an update of Stevie's *Don't You Worry 'Bout A Thing* and an album track blew up on U.S. Quiet Storm radio. Bluey remembers, "We had a hit with an instrumental called *L'arc en ciel de Miles*. It was a simple tribute track but that and *Deep Waters* from POSITIVITY were huge. The key was Richard Ball's drum programming. That rhythm is now a staple on smooth jazz records."

The albums that followed TRIBES cemented Incognito's stature as a global phenomenon. 1993's POSITIVITY was among their best, crammed full of slick productions and universal hits like *Still A Friend Of Mine* and *Givin' It Up*. "POSITIVITY sold almost a million worldwide." Bluey remembers. "It really struck a chord in America. People identified with the songs and that album sealed it. 100 DEGREES & RISING super-sealed it. For that one, I brought in Joy Malcolm and Pam Anderson for some edge and we recorded at Abbey Road with a full string section, using Clare Fischer's incredible string arrangements for Rufus as inspiration. I wanted to stretch my ability as a writer and producer and remember keeping a diary that inspired the lyrics — it was all about relating experiences as I felt them, not just about finding a catchy hook. Everything we did was accompanied by incredible remixes. *I Hear Your Name*, and *Everyday* had versions done by the best in the business like Roger Sanchez and Masters At Work. Stevie Wonder added harmonica to a re-work of *Change*. It was such an important part of our success."

On-stage too, Incognito have retained a massive fanbase from their unmissable live shows. For Bluey, it is a chance to get close to his audience. "It's not about playing the tune just to get applause. It's about communicating, making sure people get it. It's knowing that everyone shares a strong feeling of wanting to be together and experiences a little utopia, something that's not there in our daily lives. If I had to pick out some gigs, I'd say Sofia in Bulgaria, feeling the power of a crowd that are hungry for music. Montreux in 2005 too. We followed Craig David and the hall was packed. It showed me how far we have come."

Post-Talkin' Loud, the Incognito release schedule has been as busy as ever with a string of quality releases on UK label Dome and Bluey's own label set-up, Rice. The most recent album projects have, by critical acclaim, been some of Incognito's strongest. "With ADVENTURES IN BLACK SUNSHINE, it was our 25th Anniversary and I used Incognito tunes as the blueprint. It was about what influence I could have on myself and how the band could deliver that. Other recent projects have included the Hope Collective single *Give & Let Live* in aid of the Asian Tsunami victims and the people of Darfur in the Sudan, featuring an all-star cast including Chaka Khan, Steve Winwood and Omar. "We always see bands like U2 getting political but it seems to happen rarely in soul music."

"With our new album, ELEVEN, I'm recording with my touring band for the first time. I have been inspired by our live shows in 2005 — it's a very different band and the whole attitude has shifted. We have all discovered each other's lives on the road. As a writer, that's bullets in my gun! For the future, I'm looking at acts outside of my comfort zone. I want to go into the studio with Masters At Work, Morales, and Sanchez ten years down the line from their last remixes for us. I want to go to Brazil and make a record with Brazilian musicians and capture the real soul of their playing."

25 years on, the Bluey and Incognito story remains a one-off and a uniquely Great British adventure. From top ten hits to producing and arranging for Chaka Khan, Philip Bailey, and George Benson, Bluey can take his place among the greats of global soul. "It's a wonderful time for music. We are teachers, healers. I certainly see myself as much more of a healer than an entertainer."