

Unity The Band

From Fiji to the Fox Valley

CD: *Oceania*

by Mike Huberty

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Bringing some of that tropical feeling to the Fox Valley, a region famously called "The Frozen Tundra", UNITY THE BAND, plays their roots-rock reggae music for fans all over the state and they're working on the world. Frontman Pita Kotobalavu (better known to fans by his nickname, Kai) formed UNITY in 2003 after moving to Oshkosh. But here's the kicker, he moved from Hawaii, where he'd previously moved from his homeland of Fiji. What can make a man leave paradise? Children. He came to Wisconsin to be close to his family and with UNITY he's created a new one as well. "When I came here, I couldn't find any work as a mechanical engineer", he says. "So I turned to music seven years ago and here I am."

In March, they released their latest CD, *Oceania*. Named after the continent that contains the Fiji Islands, they named the album that because the songs are written through the filter of someone who carries his homeland in his heart. "All the songs on *Oceania* are based upon the Fiji Islands, and we'll be touring there next year", Kai says. "Most of these songs have been going for twenty or thirty years in the writing process and now we finally have the right sound. We try to bring the influences of everyone's background as we write the song. I write the songs, but also everybody influences it. Jason Brown (UNITY's bassist) has been the biggest influence behind this album, he was really pushing for us to try different sounds. To really get into funk, to give it an edge and people are responding to it. And it's let me try new things. I've never done blues before and 'Fiji Island Blues' is the first time I've sung blues and I'm singing in my native tongue."

And the rest of the band aren't slouches either, with music stints that range from Hank Williams III's long time bassplayer to NOFX's guitar tech, Jason "Red" Brown's bass-ing has appeared on Grammy-winning records as well as television themes. Filling up UNITY's massive lineup of musicians is drummer Kelvin Ayres, percussionist Jeremy "Chunk" Schroetter, keyboardist David LeBlanc, saxophonist Tom Jones, lead guitarist Matt Kerkhoff, and sometime background singer, Alana Miron.

The band is already having success not only in Wisconsin (where they will often play two shows a day on weekends during the summer) and Kai's native land. "New Zealand, Australia, Fiji have all been playing our music. We haven't really pushed it, just our fanbase has really pushed it, it's turning out amazing."

And he's hoping to give back to the community as well. "One of the biggest things personally for me is that we want to raise money for Red Cross and fundraising for breast cancer," He says. "We support small business and we are a small company, we try to bring everything back to the community. We want to be able to make enough money where we can write a check out at the end of the month in each city to help the poor and the sick. We help other bands too, with counseling or letting them open for us. Helping people is what it's all about, but we still have to make a living. It's a two-bladed sword, because you have to make a living but you need to help people at the same time. That's what the name of our band means. It's a battle against poverty. That's what I write music, if I can help people with every CD sale. Until the Lord calls me, then I'll stop, but for now as I'm breathing, my job's not finished."

For reggae and world music fans looking to check out a UNITY THE BAND show, Kai says that there's a little something in it for everyone. "When you leave our show", he says, "there's nothing else in the world that you can connect us to. A mixture of Bob Marley, The Rolling Stones, and James Brown all packed into one. We're an original roots-rock reggae band. Some songs attract the women, some the men, some the weed-smokers and hippies, and some are interested in the traditional African instrumentation." Madison and Milwaukee audiences will get to experience it firsthand this month at Milwaukee's Big Gig and at Atwood Summerfest.

