

Musical Youth topped the UK chart for three weeks with *Pass The Dutchie* in 1982, a song that was adapted from the Mighty Diamonds' *Pass The Kouchie*



# MUSICAL YOUTH

**Q** AFTER TOPPING CHARTS WORLDWIDE WITH ONLY THEIR SECOND SINGLE, A NEW COMPILATION SHOWS A VERY DIFFERENT VERSION OF THE MUSICAL YOUTH THAT WE KNOW. THE BAND'S CO-FOUNDER TONEY OWENS AND GUITARIST KELVIN GRANT REMEMBER THEIR BEGINNINGS AND THAT FAMOUS TITLE CHANGE...

STEVE O'BRIEN

**M**usical Youth are best known for their hugely successful 1982 No.1 single *Pass The Dutchie*, but at the time of their global breakthrough they were already three years into their career, having been assembled by Birmingham-based producer Toney Owens in 1979.

Originally comprising brothers Kelvin and Michael Grant plus Frederick (known as Junior) and Patrick Waite, as well as their father, Frederick Sr, as lead vocalist, the mostly pre-teen band secured their first Peel Session in 1981, the same year they waxed their debut double A-sided single, *Generals/Political*.

Now, nearly 50 years on from their formation, their earliest recordings are being issued – many previously unreleased – on a new compilation, *Mash Down Birmingham: The Early Recordings Of Musical Youth* via the Needle Mythology label.

**A** **These songs will be an eye-opener to people who mostly know Musical Youth from *Pass The Dutchie*, *Never Gonna Give You Up* and *Tell Me Why*, as they**

**showcase a rootsier side to the band. Does it feel good to finally get this music out there?**

**Toney:** It was music we recorded and put aside. We were trying to think about who we were attempting to reach out to and kept on sending it out until we heard from John Peel. It's good to hear it now, though, and it sounds really fresh.

**Kelvin:** I'm so grateful and happy, because it makes everybody know that, not only could we play our instruments, but we were adaptable. Junior and myself were quick learners. We were some of the youngest to play

fretless instruments, but that was all because of Fred [Sr]. In the 70s, the country was having blackouts and [in readiness of the lights going out during a gig] he told us we had to learn to play blindfolded. Mr Owens and Fred put us in a situation where we were ready for anything. We were like a sponge and we picked up everything very fast. When we were on stage as Musical Youth, I didn't need to look at any of the other members to know what we were playing – I could feel it. We were really, really into music, and I'm glad that the public will get to hear how great we were as musicians at that age.

**Much of this compilation sounds like a very different band, with Frederick Sr on vocals because Dennis Seaton, who sang the lead on *Pass The Dutchie*, didn't join until later...**

**Kelvin:** To be honest, I did prefer that band. When Dennis came in, we lost like 50 per cent of the energy. That's why I had to harmonise more with Junior to fill in the huge void.

**The compilation also includes your original version of the No.1 hit, but with the original lyrics of *Pass The Kouchie*, which was a song by Jamaican harmony trio Mighty Diamonds. How did it come about?**

**Toney:** The original was a hit of the day that Freddie really loved. He was jamming to kill some time and Charlie Arme, an A&R from London, was there that day and said he liked it, but I told him it wasn't ours. I told him it was

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KELVIN GRANT

about some Rasta man smoking the herb, and a kouchie was a pipe. He said we could change the lyrics to "Pass the Smarties" or "Pass the Mars Bar" or whatever and I said, no no, we've been on the road for the last two years trying to make people take these little kids seriously as musicians so I don't really want any gimmicks. When I went home, I stepped through the door and asked my wife, "What have you cooked today?" She said, "Look in the dutchie", meaning the Dutch pot we cooked our food in. So I immediately called Freddie, who we'd made the musical director for the band, and I said, "I'm going to the studio tomorrow, because I have it! It's 'Pass the dutchie on the left hand side', so it's related to food now instead of herbs."

**You ended up having a massive hit with the reworded version, and then your album, *The Youth Of Today*, made No.24. However your second album was criticised for sounding too polished. What do you remember of 1983's aptly-named *Different Style*?**

**Toney:** The record company had a newly appointed musical MD. MCA was predominantly a country and western label at that time, but had suddenly enjoyed success and hits with Black music, so they'd brought in a Black MD. But the Black MD, who'd specialised in R&B at his previous label had just signed New Edition, so he was going down that road. The record label basically pushed us into that area and away from our roots.

**Was the commercial failure of that album a factor in the band splitting in 1985?**

**Kelvin:** To be honest, the band's split happened naturally. There was talk of a reunion, but then Patrick passed away in 1993.

**Kelvin, why didn't you join the current incarnation of Musical Youth, which includes Dennis and your brother, Michael.**

**Kelvin:** I did one show with them at the NEC in Birmingham. It was a fashion show and I remember Mr Motivator and Grant from *EastEnders* were there, but it seemed like Dennis was trying to control the environment. He'd sung about six songs, and then I did *Sixteen*, and the crowd started to wake up. Then as soon as I came off the mic and went back on guitar, the energy dropped again. So I said to Dennis, "I think that we should start to do some new original songs now". And he said, "Well, if it ain't broke, why fix it?" After he said that, I thought I had to go away. Me and Junior [who died in 2022] were songwriters, we were always learning how to create new music



**Musical Youth evolved from Birmingham's reggae scene that included UB40 and Steel Pulse**

from Toney and Fred. I didn't think they were elevating the name of Musical Youth, so I left them to do what they were doing and decided to make new music as Kelvin Grant.

**You've released a few albums as a solo artist, including 2018's *Defend Them*. How would you describe your sound?**

**Kelvin:** Obviously I can sing soul, but I've always been a reggae artist and was heavily influenced by Sugar Minott and Jackie Mittoo. I've continued on the journey of what they taught me and create a newer version of what I've learned from them. I put rock guitar in my music, along with a lot of other elements. It's about peace and love, unity and harmony – music meant to open up your mind.

**What do you think the release of this new**

**compilation adds to the legacy of the band?**

**Kelvin:** For me, there are always secrets about a band, which we only find out later. I believe this collection shows the chemistry that we had. We had our own style and I think it's good that audiences can hear it now.

**Toney:** Much of this music is from 1980 and 1981, but the songs are relevant to what's happening in the world today.

**Kelvin:** Not only can you hear the style and the sound of the music we were making, but you can understand the times that we were living in. We did *Generals/Political* in 1981... and we're there again now. What goes around comes around. ■

● ***Mash Down Birmingham: The Early Recordings Of Musical Youth* is released on 22 May via Needle Mythology and reviewed on page 91**

***Mash Down Birmingham* features music taken from reels stored by the group's manager Toney Owens for over 40 years**

