

## 54-40 // Keep On Walking

Even in today's absurdly fragmented music scene, it's easy to spot legendary bands. They're the ones reliably cranking out great album after great album, each distinct and accessible, in sync with the times and yet timeless. Also, kicking up more dust than the above statement might suggest.

Witness pop/rock luminaries 54-40: established New Year's Eve 1980 at Vancouver's famed Smilin' Buddha Cabaret, writers of countless iconic, enduring, chart-topping gems, worshipped by millions at home in Canada and across the globe.

Legendary, indeed, and still insanely vital, not to mention consistently in-demand on marquee stages far and wide. Fittingly, in their 38<sup>th</sup> year as a band (!), 54-40 is unleashing *Keep On Walking*, their most eclectic, propulsive, flat-out excellent album in a career spilling over with them.

Featuring 11 original songs helmed by a quartet of superstar producers that would make a gear nerd quiver, *Keep On Walking* is a vivid snapshot of precisely where singer/guitarist Neil Osborne, bassist Brad Merritt, drummer Matt Johnson, and guitarist Dave Genn — songwriters and multi-instrumentalists all — are right now: totally dialled in and seriously on fire.

For evidence, check towering rock anthem "Sucker For Your Love," the album's scorching new single propelled by electrifying lead guitar, thundering bass, and soaring "Hey! Hey!" chants. "A classic, in-the-wheelhouse 54-40 song," as Osborne describes it.

Then there's the breathtakingly intimate, candlelit ballad "Hold My Kiss," which "wrote itself," Osborne confirms, "as did a few others over my career like 'One Gun,' 'I Go Blind' and 'Ocean Pearl,'" which augurs rather well for the song's widespread appeal.

Elsewhere on the new album, the hard-charging, horn-goosed barn-burner "Can't Hide My Love" contrasts sharply with the jangly and deceptively sunny title track.

Those four songs, whittled from 25-odd demos, were produced, respectively, by Garth Richardson (see also 54-40's *Since When* from 1998), Gavin Brown (Billy Talent, the Tragically Hip), Steven Drake (54-40's *Trusted by Millions* from 1996) and veteran 54-40 accomplice Dave (Rave) Ogilvie, whose multiple credits include 2015's acclaimed career retrospective, *La Difference – A History Unplugged*.

Despite input from those dynamic contributors, *Keep On Walking* has a seamless vibe, held together equally by Osborne's inimitable voice and panoramic lyrics and by 54-40's honed-over-decades hivemind. In that sense, *Keep On Walking* is the quintessential 54-40 record: at once instantly familiar and dazzlingly new.

"Gavin has a system of recording that is tight and efficient but still leaves room for the magic that can happen spontaneously during recording," Johnson offers. Osborne adds that when it came to deciding who would produce what, "We asked the producers which songs among our demos piqued their interest and went from there."

Johnson continues: "Steven relies on a creative and open-ended dialogue between the artist and himself to propel the music to its destined place. Garth uses an old-school approach to achieve timeless and performance-oriented recordings. And Rave is what we'd call our fifth member, the ultimate facilitator. All ideas have potential when you are making a record with him."

While long-time 54-40 fans will find recognizable sonic touchstones on *Keep On Walking*, sharp left turns also appear, perhaps most notably in the two tracks produced in Toronto by first-time 54-40 collaborator Gavin Brown — the above-mentioned “Hold My Kiss,” and the swirling, futuristic yet somehow vaguely psychedelic “Sublime Like Me.”

“My favourite song on the album,” Johnson says of “Sublime.” “I love the groove.”

“We’ve played the song live a few times and it’s already evolving,” Merritt adds. “I think it has the potential to become a staple of our live shows well into the future.”

Ah, the future — a concept very much in 54-40’s sightlines as *Keep On Walking* lands on the fragmented (there’s that word again) contemporary musical landscape. But a plan is afoot. The album is the flagship release for kaleidoscopic entrepreneur and *Dragons’ Den* personality Michael Wekerle’s groundbreaking new El Mocambo Entertainment imprint. The label is part of a broader business venture that includes reopening Toronto’s celebrated El Mocambo nightclub as well as launching production studios.

As Osborne explains, Wekerle assisted with the band’s crowdfunding campaign for the *A History Unplugged* record, and it snowballed from there.

“The record industry has changed a lot and we are back to the old days — the *really* old days of Mozart and Bach and Beethoven — where artists need patrons to be able to do things,” he says. “The Internet certainly helps but it’s nice to have someone in your corner help out. Michael has been a fan of the band for a long time, and his commitment to music is hugely valuable to all of us.”

Even among legends, 54-40’s success across the decades is virtually unparalleled. Formed in Vancouver by Osborne and Merritt on the cusp of the 1980s, the band — with only three line-up changes since its inception — quickly caught on with discerning local audiences, mining that rarefied space between rock, punk, folk, and pop.

The release of their self-titled album in 1986 heralded the arrival of a powerhouse with the songs “Baby Ran,” “Take My Hand,” “I Wanna Know,” and, especially, “I Go Blind” steamrolling across alternative, campus, and commercial radio nationwide and beyond while cementing 54-40’s status as songwriters of the highest order.

And the hits never stopped: “One Day in Your Life” and “One Gun” from 1987’s *Show Me*; “Baby Have Some Faith” from 89’s *Fight For Love*; “She La” and “Nice to Luv You” from 92’s *Dear Dear*; “Ocean Pearl,” “Assoholic,” and “Radio Luv Song” from 94’s *Smilin’ Buddha Cabaret*; “Love You All” from 96’s *Trusted by Millions...* and so on (and on and on).

54-40 also emerged as music video trailblazers, cutting innovative clips that immediately went into high rotation, remaining lodged on playlists for years.

“When I started playing,” Osborne recalls with a chuckle, “I was an angry young man with a big mission. And I used to say, ‘If I am still doing this when I’m 30, I’m going to shoot myself.’ And then I said, ‘If I am still doing this when I am 40, someone please shoot me.’ Now it’s like, ‘If I am doing this at age 50 and over, ‘Fucking, eh!’”

As Merritt notes, despite the many variables within 54-40 albums — including working with heavyweight producers including Don Smith (Tom Petty, Bob Dylan, John Hiatt) and Warne Livesey (Midnight Oil, Matthew Good), for instance — a kind of spiritual line-through is traceable.

“The song ‘Baby Have Some Faith’ is definitely one you could link to *Keep On Walking*,” he says. “They share the same creative impetus, and explore similar themes, but from different angles.” Similarly, the loose-limbed, mostly acoustic and anthemic “Dream We Spoke Of” — produced by Osborne and Genn for *Keep On Walking* — wouldn’t be out of place on the *Show Me* album.

“This record already feels like a success to me,” Osborne says of *Keep On Walking*. “The fact that we created it while really enjoying playing together is an accomplishment, and why Brad and I started the band in the first place.”

Adds guitarist/keyboardist Genn, “Exercising the creative muscle is a labour of love, and writing and recording keeps us engaged and challenged. But I still want as many people as possible to hear this album, be it through radio, playlists, live shows, word-of-mouth... whatever. That to me will equal success.”

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