

BEN HARPER & THE INNOCENT CRIMINALS

LIFELINE

Combining shuddering, groove-laden funky soul and folky handcrafted acoustics, singer/songwriter Ben Harper enjoyed cult status during the course of the '90s before gaining wider attention toward the decade's end. As a young artist, Harper combined elements of classic singer/songwriters, blues revivalists, Jimi Hendrix, and such '90s jam bands as Blues Traveler and Phish, which meant that he was embraced by critics and college kids alike. Despite the commercial success of the radio single "Steal My Kisses" in 2000, Harper continued to explore different musical textures into the 21st century, enjoying a solid fanbase at home and a considerable amount of fame in Europe, where he was named 2003's "Artist of the Year" by the French branch of Rolling Stone.

A native of California, Harper grew up listening to blues, folk, soul, R&B, and reggae. He started playing guitar as a child, and began to perform regularly as a preteen. During his adolescence, he turned toward acoustic slide guitar, which would eventually become his signature instrument. Harper scored a deal with Virgin Records in 1992 after a steady schedule of shows in the L.A. area; two years later, he released his debut album, *Welcome to the Cruel World*, to positive reviews.

Released in 1995, the politically heavy *Fight for Your Mind* made for a strong sophomore effort, an obvious growth in musical experimentation and individual declamation. It was also the songwriter's first record to later reach gold status. Harper's third album, 1997's *The Will to Live*, pushed his blues-oriented alternative folk into the middle mainstream, becoming a mainstay at college radio and making inroads at adult alternative radio. Recorded over two years of touring in support of *Fight for Your Mind*, *The Will to Live* also introduced the Innocent Criminals, Harper's supporting band. The Innocent Criminals -- bassist Juan Nelson, drummer Dean Butterworth, and percussionist David Leach -- helped solidify Harper's musical rhythms and emotional diversity.

Harper's career gained momentum during 1998 and 1999. One of his most successful albums to date, 1999's *Burn to Shine* blended his fondness of '20s jazz compositions and urban beatboxing, resulting in a clever and passionate collection of songs. "Steal My Kisses" and "Suzie Blue" were radio favorites, landing him two headlining world tours and an opening spot on the Dave Matthews Band's summer trek of 2000. In spring 2001, Harper issued *Live from Mars*, a double disc of live electric and acoustic material spanning the previous year's tour and including covers of material by Led Zeppelin, the Verve, and Marvin Gaye.

When it came to recording his fifth studio effort, Harper went back to the drawing board. He'd circled the world countless times and, naturally, he brashly sang about it on the worldbeat-inspired *Diamonds on the Inside*, which appeared in March 2003. After a European tour with the Blind Boys of Alabama in 2004, the two acts entered the studio together and laid down ten tracks in two different sessions at Capitol Records' basement studios. The resulting collaborative album (issued under the names of both Harper and the Blind Boys of Alabama), *There Will Be a Light*, was released in September 2004, followed by the concert CD/DVD package *Live at the Apollo* in 2005. Eager to release more material, Harper returned to work with The Innocent Criminals and issued the double album *Both Sides of the Gun* March 2006. The album reached number seven on the Billboard album charts and rose to number one in Australia. While touring in support of the record, Harper and company began playing a new slew of songs during their evening soundchecks, eventually decamping to Paris and recording the material within one week. The resulting products, *Lifeline* and *Live at Twist and Shout* Records, were issued in 2007. ~ MacKenzie Wilson, All Music Guide

