

# ANOTHER LEVEL

**Level 42** were one of the defining bands of 80s pop, with their slick jazz-funk sound and high-class musicianship. With a new album in the shops, Ian Peel spoke to band members past and present about the key records that have shaped their 25-year story.

## **Sandstorm (Elite DAZZ 4) 1980**

It all started with this 12" white label promo, released on a small independent label run by Andy Sojka. His own band, Powerline, was on the A-side, and his new discoveries, Level 42, were on the flip.

Phil Gould was there from the start – as drummer, songwriter and, for a split second, lead singer. 'We began by jamming together on Monday evenings at the Guildhall School of Music,' he recalls. 'Most of the early tunes were instrumentals written by Mark King [bass/vocals] or Mike Lindup [keyboards], such as *Theme To Margaret* or *Sandstorm*. The first real song came about after a meeting with Andy Sojka. He really liked a riff Mark had, which was loosely inspired by *I Thought It Was You* by Herbie Hancock. He asked us if we could put a top line and lyrics to it, which Mark and Boon [Phil's brother, guitarist and Level 42 lyricist] duly did. The song was called *Love Meeting Love*.'

## **Love Meeting Love (Elite DAZZ 5) 1980**

The four-man formation that was in place for these early recordings was to hold firm for the next 10 years. But there was one more character about to appear – the guru-like synth player Wally Badarou. Though he's never appeared on stage with the band, the French keyboard man has been an integral part of Level 42's sound and songs.

Badarou started life as a sessioneer in Paris' 70s disco scene, before working on Grace Jones' seminal *Island* albums in the 80s and film soundtracks in the 90s and beyond. He met Phil Gould when both men played on the track *Pop Muzik* by M.

'Phil and I felt there was some affinity in the way we would jam, when rehearsing *Pop Muzik* for *Top Of The Pops*,' says Badarou today. 'It was obvious we shared the same kind of fusion-jazz view, and he thought I should be introduced to one of his friends – a fantastic bass player with whom he was putting together a band.'

'I met them, all four, with Mike and Boon, and jammed with them occasionally. Once they'd got their contract, they invited me to join them in the studio for overdubs on *Love Meeting Love*. Everybody was nervous to make the best of each end every minute detail of the recording process. Only when the backing tracks were rocking on tape, did the issue arise as to who was going to sing it.'



Level 42 from left to right: Boon and Phil Gould, Mark King, Mike Lindup.

Gould remembers everyone having a go at singing the song in the studio. 'At which point we realised Mark had the best voice, closely followed by Mike, then Boon, with me bringing up the rear. It's still a source of great pain after all these years!'

## **Love Games (Polydor POSP 234) 1981**

'When *Love Meeting Love* came out, it sold well and was soon licensed through Polydor,' says Gould. 'Over the summer, we picked up lots of airplay, made the Top 75, were welcomed into the burgeoning Brit/funk community and, by the end of the year, were offered a five album record deal with Polydor. *Love Games*, the first single released under the Polydor deal, came out in early '81, went Top 40, and gave us the beginnings of a loyal, solid fanbase. That kept us afloat in times when the record company was possibly wondering what they'd got themselves into.'

## **Strategy (Elite LEVLP 1) 1982**

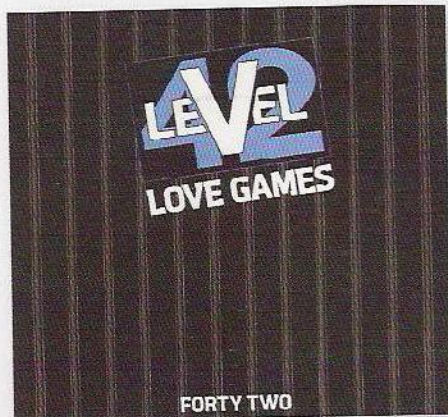
The move from Elite to Polydor wasn't entirely seamless, however. One by-product was the mythical *Strategy* LP, which has since attained Holy Grail status among fans of LFT (as Badarou refers to them).

'I have never seen a copy of this record,' says Mark King. 'As far as I know, it's either a compilation of jazz-funk acts from the time or just a myth.' In actual fact, it was to be the first Level 42 album, and a handful of promos were pressed. But Elite was beaten to the finish line not once, but twice: First, Polydor released the band's actual *opportunity* debut in August '81. Second, it reproduced *Strategy*'s track listing exactly in March '82 (as *The Early Tapes*).

The album was rereleased and remastered in 2000, with one of Gould's most challenging performances, *Mr Pink (Live)*, as a bonus track. 'I think that represents a physical peak for me,' he says. 'I would need a few months' training before I attempted it now.'



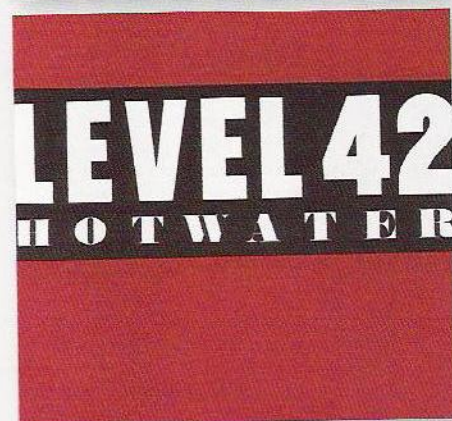
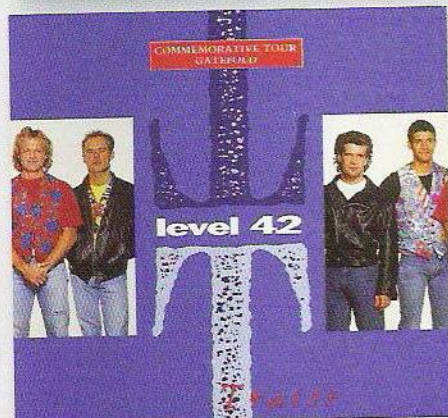
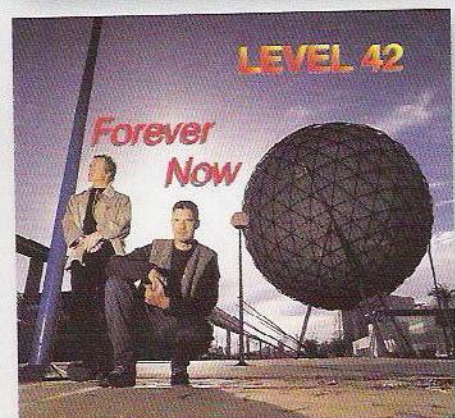
FREEDOM



FORTY TWO

LIMITED 10" SINGLE  
SOMETHING ABOUT YOU - THE CHINESE WAY - FOLLOW ME

level 42



Clockwise from top left: A product of burgeoning songwriters having too much material to know what to do with, *Freedom* came out under the pseudonym Thunderthumbs & The Toetsenman; the Top 40 *Love Games*, Level 42's first Polydor single; the *Something About You 10"* that helped the band gain crossover popularity; the *Hot Water 12"* bridged Level 42's gap between funk and pop; *Tracie*, the third single with new drummer Gary Husband, saw Husband adopt a co-writing role; *Forever Now* saw Phil Gould make a temporary return to the drum stool.

#### **Freedom (Polydor POSP 480) 1982**

Alongside *Strategy* and *The Early Tapes*, 1982 also saw the band release their first truly robust album, *The Pursuit of Accidents*. Its singles vaporised, but the groove they got into halfway through Side Two showed that they were progressing as songwriters as well as players. King and Lindup, in particular, had more songs than they knew what to do with, releasing *Freedom* under the bizarre pseudonym of Thunderthumbs & The Toetsenman.

'I needed to raise a deposit for a mortgage and Polydor offered me a solo deal,' says King. 'I kicked that off with *Freedom*, on which Mike helped me out. But, by the time I got round to recording the rest of the album [*Influences*] in 1984, I had completely forgotten about *Freedom*, so it never appeared on the album at all! The name Thunderthumbs & The Toetsenman came from Holland. Toetsenman is Dutch for pianist.'

#### **Standing In The Light (Polydor POLD 5110) 1983**

In 1983, the band released this forgotten classic, which saw Lindup come to the fore, taking lead vocals on some tracks and beginning a run of 'George Harrison moments' on Level 42's albums (*Two Solitudes* on *Running in the Family*, *Silence* on *Sailing at the Sun*, *Iasso The Moon* on *Guaranteed*). Today, Lindup considers the track *People* (an attack on the white Ford Capri brigade with which LFT had been unfairly shackled) to be particularly special.

'It started off in a dream,' he says. 'I awoke with a very simple bassline which sounded fantastic in my head, so I went to the piano and played... Two notes. I thought to myself, is that all? But I persevered, and eventually it came together.'

'Recording it was also special, as it was done in LA with Larry Dunn and Verdine White from Earth Wind & Fire. Listening to those other songs, I can hear a good song trying to burst out from the production technique. But there's too much sequenced keyboard going on.'

Gould, however, favours another track on the album. 'The track which is closest to my heart is *I Want Eyes*,' he says. 'I never get tired of hearing it. The night we recorded the vocal was a very special moment in the life of that band. There was a definite vibe in that room that evening.'

#### **Hot Water (Polydor POSPX 697) 1984**

The band's big breakthrough single came when they moved from funk to pop music. Bridging the gap was this 12", as bought by future LFT guitarist, Jakko Jakszyk.

'I remember very clearly buying the 12" version. I was in the process of remixing my Striff release. I Can't Stand This Pressure, with Scott Litt [now famous for producing REM] and we played it really loud in the studio, as a kind of guide to being musical in a 12" dance context. I was aware of Level 42 before that, but that track had a toughness that I really liked.'

The track became a live favourite, not least for Gould. 'Hot Water was always fun to play,' he says. 'The groove on it was something with which I became closely associated, at least within the fraternity of drummers.'

#### **A Physical Presence (Polydor POLH 23) 1985**

*Hot Water* led to another album, 1984's flawed masterpiece, *True Colours*, which in great songs strained under the weight of their own production.

Those songs sounded far more comfortable on the following year's live album, *A Physical Presence*.

'Mark and Phil clicked very well on that album,' recalls jazz drummer and pianist Gary Husband. A few years later, he would replace Phil Gould on the Level 42 drum stool, but in 1985 he was just listening in. 'I didn't think the drums sounded at all strong on those early Level 42 records, but, once Phil got it together, I thought he was really saying something. He had some real character and personality to his playing.'

#### **Something About You (Polydor POSPT 759) 1985**

By now, the band had a solid reputation in fusion circles, but *Something About You* proved their crossover potential and led to an appearance on *The Tube* on Channel Four. This 10" version, boasted some decent remixes, too. 'In those days, there was a general perception in the jazz world that it didn't require much effort or talent to create successful pop songs,' says Badarou. 'So the band thought it was high time people realised they could write good songs, too. *Something About You* put the band in the higher ranks of mainstream pop – a position they consolidated with *Lessons In Love* and *Running In The Family*.'

#### **It's Over (Polydor POSP 900) 1987**

The band had truly evolved. But, in the summer of 1987, the original line-up disintegrated. Phil Gould went his own way, quickly followed by his brother, who would take on a non-touring, non-performing Bernie Taupin role for the records that were to follow.

No band could have written a better song on which to bow out than *It's Over*. 'It's weird that the last single that came out was called *It's Over*,' says Gould today. 'It seemed like a swansong when we did the TV shows and filmed the video just before I left. That song always comes to mind when I think back to the darker days.'

#### Staring At The Sun (Polydor POLH 50) 1988

Following the collapse of the original LFT, King and Lindup joined forces with Gary Husband and Alan Murphy (Kate Bush's guitarist), taking the band in a whole new direction. 'There's a lot of information to the way Mark plays,' says Husband. 'The trick is to find the right way to combine myself with what he does. A certain kind of economy is essential, but there's a balance between that and how the drums can inject a lot of spirit and movement at the same time. I've always been really thankful to Mark for believing in me.'

#### Tracie (Polydor PO 34) 1989

Three singles in. LFT's new drummer found himself co-writer. He recalls, 'Mark had an instrumental structure and gave me the opportunity to pull together some lyrics for it – overnight! Dutifully, I cobbled some rather average effort, but, cheesy as it was, it seemed to be just about passable. I based it on some girl I'd had a crush on at school. It was pretty bad, but at the same time it was also what I affectionately call 'bubblegum', which has actually done very well throughout the history of popular song writing!

That track also features a drum break/fill that I think I also played on Grace Jones' *Slave To The Rhythm* session. Many drummers contributed to that track. Maybe that was the only bit Trevor Horn used that was me, as I heard later he used bits of many people. I could well be wrong on this, though. Some of my past is a little hazy!

#### Take Care Of Yourself (Polydor PZ 58) 1989

Just a year after joining the band, Alan Murphy died from an Aids related illness. At the time, he and Husband were steering Level 42 in a new direction, with records such as this *12*, which starts off with just guitar and drums – a complete departure from Level 42's sound up until that point.

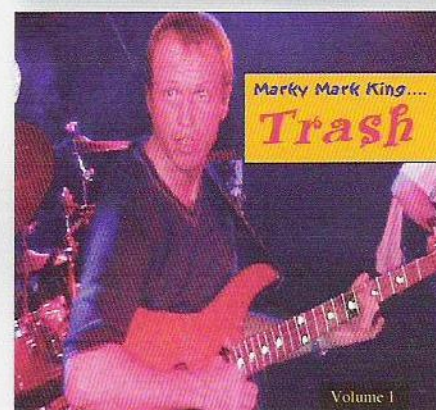
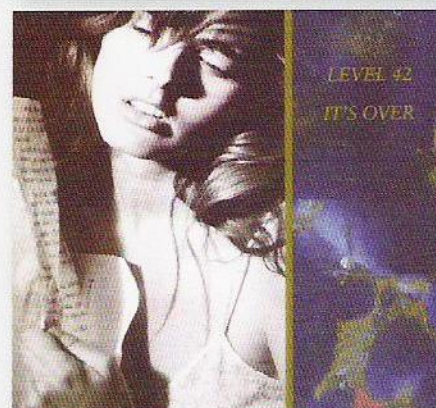
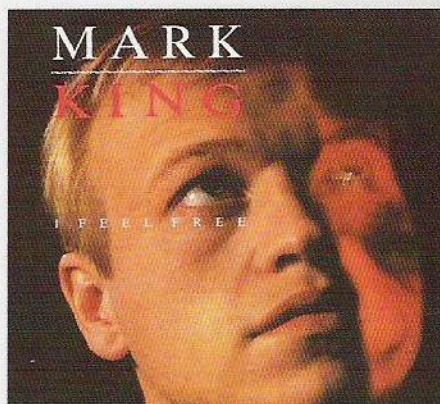
'I very much liked the direction *Take Care of Yourself* was signalling,' says Husband in retrospect. 'There was a strong swing/funk feel to it. Sadly, it was the last thing Alan got to be involved in before he became seriously ill. It's nice that he played some wonderful stuff on the track, but dreadfully sad that, literally while the video was being shot, he was actually dying.'

'It was a really awful, tragic time, full of anguish and shock. Seeing a friend deteriorate so rapidly meant that I hardly noticed what a really great song we had together. I was in pieces.'

#### Guaranteed (RCA PL 75055) 1991

In the 90s, King, Lindup and Husband decamped to RCA Records, recruiting two new guitarists to replace Murphy. First was Allan Holdsworth, who brought gravitas to the band's increasingly pop image during a record-breaking run of gigs at the Hammermith Odeon. But, while he was responsible for much of the guitar playing on the *Guaranteed* album, it was Jakko Jakszyk who completed the line-up on tour and on later sessions.

'Aside from touring, I played on the B-side. At this *Great Distance*,' says Jakszyk. 'I also played on *Years Go By*. There were a handful of things we



From top: *I Feel Free*, a single from Mark King's 1984 solo debut, *Influences*; aptly-titled *It's Over*, this 1987 single was the final release from the full line-up, with Phil Gould soon leaving the group, and his brother Boon taking up a non-touring, non-performing role; Marky Mark King's *Trash*, a collection of demos available through the internet; *Retroglide*, Level 42's 2006 return.

recorded in some aborted sessions with producer Pete Lorimer, including a song called *Fire*, which I had a hand in writing, as I recall. There was also something called *Free Your Soul* and another instrumental with the working title of *Thieving TV Bastards*.'

This no doubt referred to the new theme to the BBC's *Watchdog* series, which bore a striking resemblance to previous single, *Heaven In My Hands*. But the band had no reason to be bitter. They'd never had such a raft of songwriters among their number, and *Guaranteed* was an album of overlooked classics.

#### Forever Now (Resurgence LV 102 CD) 1994

Gould made a temporary return to the LFT fold on the 1994 album, *Forever Now*. The band were still signed to RCA at the time, but the 'Director's Cut' edition on *Resurgence* is the one to look for.

'It has nearly all the tracks we originally recorded,' says Lindup. 'The record company got involved with the creative process on the original, with the A&R men choosing the tracks they wanted to release. The *Resurgence* version is the proper document of all the work and creativity that went into it. In my opinion, it's one of our best albums.'

The creative tensions between band and label came at just the wrong time, as the early 90s acid jazz scene should have dovetailed perfectly with the band's sound. Instead, as support for the band evaporated within RCA, King and Lindup agreed to put *Level 42* on ice.

'The final show was terribly emotional,' recalls Jakszyk. It was at the Royal Albert Hall. I remember the sound of my guitar filling the venue as we played *It's Over* one last time. As we took our final bow, Mark lent over and said, 'Your all fired!' Such was his gallows humour. It was a joy to be in the band.'

#### Trash (CD-R, no cat no) 1999

King continued to perform, as The Mark King Group, Level 42's Mark King, Grupo Mark King and even Marky Mark King. It was under this last banner that he made *Trash*, a collection of demos, available through the internet.

'The title referred to the fact that these songs were cluttering up my shelves,' says King. 'Tragically, for the public, there's more to come!'

Lindup and Gould have also pursued solo careers away from Level 42, while Badarou's solo work runs tandem to the whole LFT project (and has much in common with the full band's albums). Though all are of interest to Level 42 fans, most essential is probably Lindup's *Conversations With Silence* from 2003.

#### Retroglide (Universal, W 141704323) 2006

With relative solo success for LFT's constituent parts, it could have been the end of the story for the band. But, last year, King and Lindup released *Retroglide* under the Level 42 banner. Gould is gone again and Husband is back on drums. King's brother Nathan is on guitar. Boon looms large. The album draws various threads of the Level 42 story together, before sending them off in another new direction.

And, while the new material and new ideas keep flowing, a healthy reissue campaign helps to keep the band on the record shop shelves a quarter of a century after their first release. 'I don't have a problem with Polydor missing out back catalogue,' says King. 'There are generations out there now that don't know any of it at all.'

As for the future, King has at least one new idea. 'We've recently done an acoustic version of *All I Need* from *Retroglide*,' he reveals with a glint in his eye. 'It gave it another dimension, so it might be cool to put together an acoustic collection. Or maybe not.' ●

## Top 10 Level 42 rarities

- 10 Sandstorm (Elite DAZZ4) £50**  
One of several valuable white labels, including the Dream Crazy 7" and Starchild 12".
- 9 True Colours (Polydor POLHX 10) £60**  
This cassette plays the album on one side, with extended remixes on the other.
- 8 Microkid (Polydor POSPX 643) £80**  
One of the remixes on this promo 12" hasn't surfaced anywhere else since.
- 7 You Can't Blame Louis (Polydor POSPX 500) £110**  
This white label single was dropped in favour of Weave Your Spell.
- 6 Guaranteed (RCA PL 75055) £150**  
A promotional box set, containing promo cassette and CD copies of the album.
- 5 Standing In The Light (Polydor POLD 5110) £120**  
The white label promo of this album has a gatefold sleeve with unique artwork.
- 4 Love Meeting Love (Elite DAZ 5) £200**  
Both this Music Centre test pressing and its 12" counterpart command big money.
- 3 Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind (Polydor POSPX 70) £200**  
The 12" picture disc is quite rare, but this white vinyl test pressing is rarer.
- 2 Love Meeting Love (Elite DAZZ 5) £400**  
Only a few copies of this debut 12" on clear vinyl were pressed.
- 1 Strategy (Elite LEVLP 1) £1000**  
Just six copies of the band's intended debut album are known to exist.

With thanks to Paul Waller

