

## **Anthem to a lost Velvet Revolution**

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Until their recent single 'Your Town' burst on the radio, Deacon Blue seemed destined to remain one of Britain's least fashionable bands. Although hugely successful, their particular style of melodic, song-based rock has been like a red rag to a bullish music press.

Adjectives like pompous, bombastic and shallow have clung to them like a ball and chain. That their singer and songwriter Ricky Ross, a Dundonian transplanted to Glasgow, was once a teacher has caused particular irritation. That he should include his girlfriend and now wife Lorraine McIntosh within the group's five-strong line up is, apparently, simply heinous.

'Your Town' upset prejudices overnight. With its eerie distortion of Ross's characteristically intense vocals and its soaring, driving choruses, it is straightforward, excellent pop, and the result of an unlikely pairing with the Perfecto production team of Steve Osborne and Paul Oakenfold, more associated with dance-orientated acts such as Arrested Development, Neneh Cherry and the notorious Happy Mondays. Ross and McIntosh, fresh from a walk in a London park with their baby daughter Emer, grin in recognition that the subtext to a lot of grudging press praise was 'Most Loathed Group in Decent Record Shock'.

Approaching their fourth studio album (excluding 1990's *Ooh Las Vegas*, a collection of B-sides and out-takes), Ross says that the popular vote within Deacon Blue was to try a producer who would undermine their normal working methods and push them in new directions. Osborne and Oakenfold, perhaps anxious to establish themselves independent of the fast-imploding Manchester scene, happily accepted the job. 'After hearing us rehearse, Steve commented that our music sounded really balanced and what he'd like to do would be to unbalance it,' recalls Ross. 'That was exactly what we wanted to hear.'



*Willing victims: Ricky Ross and Lorraine McIntosh suffered the tyranny of their producers in silence / Photograph: Norman Lomax.*

The resulting *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing* is a triumphant cross-pollination of styles and textures, held together by Ross's most focussed songwriting to date and the trademark, apparently instinctive, vocal symbiosis between him and his wife. There was no gain without pain however; Osborne and Oakenfold took seriously the invitation to meddle and McIntosh admits cheerfully to having been reduced to tears on at least one occasion by their tyranny. Ross meanwhile, with a bravery more band leaders should emulate, allowed the two producers carte blanche on song selection, keeping a stiff upper lip when personal favourites were tossed aside.

Their belief in strength through change may be why Deacon Blue have consistently out-performed most of the many American-influenced bands to surface in the mid-eighties – Hue and Cry, Love and Money, The Big Dish, Danny Wilson and Wet Wet Wet among them. Although the low-key *Raintown*, their first LP, became an unofficial soundtrack on its release in 1988 [sic], Ross has avoided trying to re-create it. Its successor, *When The World Knows Your Name*, took a self-consciously rockist approach while 1991's *Fellow Hoodlums* recalled the work of Glasgow painters Peter Howson and Ken Currie in its concentration on the less lovely aspects of life in the city. 'I've never wanted us to be a museum piece, a relic of one of the many bloomings of Scottish pop,' shrugs Ross. 'I always wanted our records to be relevant to the here and now.'

He and McIntosh admit to a problematic relationship with their homeland. A prevailing 'We can make you or break you' attitude to homegrown talent can breed massive resentment of performers who leave to find international success, as Billy Connolly and Sheena Easton will testify.

Those who stay behind are watched mawkishly for signs of a swelling head. 'My family do it with Connolly all the time,' says McIntosh. 'He's no funnier than half the men in the shipyard. I know the guy who writes all his jokes and he's not living it up in Hollywood... People hate to lose their hold on you.'

Ross laughs loudly as he recalls an incendiary comment by the comic-in-exile during a recent visit to the Edinburgh Festival: 'He said he'd rather be Bosnian than Scottish. You couldn't devise a comment more likely to get up *The Glasgow Herald's* nose – he had journalists fizzing with hatred. I thought, Good on you, pal. He's disliked just because he was talented enough to get out and wouldn't settle for being a big fish in a small pond.'

Friends and family – and a strong commitment to the movement for an independent Scotland – keep the couple in Glasgow for the time being. Ross was hesitant initially about being seen as yet another non-expert dabbling in politics, but the force of their conviction stirred him and McIntosh to take a high-profile stance in the run-up to last year's general election. 'There were such great expectations in the air – a Velvet Revolution atmosphere. At the same time, Lorraine and I discovered we were going to have a baby. These two things coming together were mind-blowing. Our world seemed – quite literally in one sense – pregnant with possibilities.'

The defeat of Labour and the SNP at the polls represented what Ross calls 'the double-Dommsday scenario, a devastating blow.' His feelings about the subject, and on the wider issue of national identity, thread their way through the songs on *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing*. 'After *Raintown* and *Fellow Hoodlums* I felt I'd drawn enough on Scotland for inspiration, but I've ended up writing more about the country, albeit subconsciously, than ever before,' he notes. Quite how the Glasgow critics will react to such a perfect pop record springing from their midst remains to be seen.

*'Whatever You Say, Say Nothing'* is released tomorrow by Columbia, all formats. A single, 'Will We Be Lovers' is also available. Deacon Blue preview an extensive British tour with two club dates at London's Clapham Grand on Thursday and Friday.

**Alan Jackson**