

BEATS OF YOUR TOWN

On the eve of the release of their new album 'Ocean's Apart', **Grant McLennan**, co-leader of watershed Brisbane pop group, **The Go-Betweens**, takes the time to grant Robiter an interview. **Matthew 'The Rock Lobster' Lobb** reports

The Clowns Come To Town – Film School Rejections and UQ Librarians

Long before Queensland art tangled at a pretty summit with pop music (the years prior to LP wonderworks such as *Before Hollywood*, *Liberty Belle* And *The Black Diamond Express* and *16 Lovers Lane*), one Grant McLennan had been knocked back from film and television school on account of his 16 years. Enrolment in an arts program at the University of Queensland came, therefore, as a sort of edifying compromise.

Once at St. Lucia, the undergraduate - a brainy eldest child from rural Queensland - befriended a gracefully mincing eccentric named Robert Forster who played guitar and wrote his own songs. The two bonded over shared tastes in skewered pop culture and spent a lot of time at the Humanities library reading, in import copies of *The Village Voice*, about emerging bands like **Television** and **Talking Heads**.



Go-Betweens circa '78:
Librarians Beware

OCEAN'S APART PICKED APART Grant talks Robiter through the new album

'Here Comes A City' (the first single): "a cranking, Düsseldorf, wild party ride, travelling on a very, very fast train through German darkness with one of the most twisted get-togethers happening on the train. It's an absolute, stomping groove kind of song."



No doubt McLennan was more studious than his pal who failed both at arts and at convincing him to form a rock group. While a disciplined McLennan passed classes with focused endeavour, Forster was crashing heavily and channelling his vigour into composing songs about would-be love interests. One very good tune in particular loosely extolled an imaginary UQ librarian, and sounded as if the **Velvet Underground** were being spun out of Brisbane with a prudish virgin's hair-triggered self-awareness. The song was called 'Karen', and would eventually generate interest in vain from Beserkley Records - the US home of **Jonathan Richman**, whose song 'Girlfren' is almost a Boston-borne sister to 'Karen'. Needless to say McLennan would avoid all folly of music making so long as decent grades were to be attained.

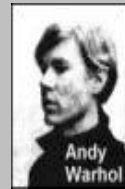
So it was in late 1977 when McLennan, thitherto Semper Floreat's straw-haired movie critic and night manager of the Schonell Theatre, finished studying and finally acceded half-heartedly to the wishes of Forster. That Brisbane summer the two 19-year olds formed The Go-Betweens: a band of lasting importance whose depth of originality and beauty I find profound. In terms of exquisitely literate and melodic pop songs, virtually nothing matches McLennan's 'Cattle And Cane', or Forster's 'Part Company' and 'Dive For Your Memory'.

Head Full of Steam – The Dentist

Perhaps with a misconception that I am writing for Semper as he once did, McLennan has agreed to meet with me. In a matter of weeks (May 1), The Go-Betweens will release their ninth album proper, *Oceans Apart*. This willingness to discuss the forthcoming LP implies McLennan's studio-buzz - that joy of recent creation - is yet to wear off.

It's very good of McLennan to sit with me. He has come straight from the dentist with a sleepy mouth bearing no wisdom teeth. As such, he can only drink sparkling water. McLennan's possibly manicured fingers tinker upon a bottle while eyes avert behind dark sunglasses. The anaesthetic in his face slightly touches his speech, and for a moment McLennan is wired with praise for his dentist.

'Finding You' "has got a touch of, you know, [a] party upstairs at the Dome in the mid-'60s of the Warhol scene"



'Lavender' "is one of two love songs to Tasmania on the record. It's more about, I guess, a certain way of thinking that Tasmanians have: it's a reggae track. Almost. When we were recording... all we ever watched as this one video, because it's so good, of the early **Wailers** - all these great young singers and writers in the late '60s and early '70s playing this very minimal sort of very smoky, sunny, joyous, scratchy sort of pop, you know, reggae... and so 'Lavender' is not in that direction."



"She booked, x-rayed it, and said, 'Well, let's just take it out now.'
- 'Ohhh, yep: let's take it out now.'
- 'Why don't we? Let's take it out, okay? Can you feel that?'
- 'Well not really, but that hurt 'cause you just put a needle in.'
- 'Does that hurt now?'
- 'Oww,'
- 'It's out.'"

You know, none of that W.C. Fields knee-up chest pulling.'

In 1978, to help McLennan transform from green arts graduate to artful musician, Forster was teaching him the bass guitar. Soon the two tyros self-released 'Karen' on the flip side of a poppier single, 'Lee Remick', before ending their Able Label venture with 'People Say' - the band's **Dylan**esque single of 1979. The group was without a permanent drummer when 'I Need Two Heads' was next released on Postcard - the Scottish label devised by and for other indie-pop boy geniuses **Orange Juice**. Then, in 1980, The **Go-Betweens** expanded to include drummer Lindy Morrison.

McLennan had begun contributing his own songs, although - too maladroit to sing them while playing bass - Forster often ended up interpreting the vocals ('Your Turn My Turn'). Later, to expand the group's sound by moving McLennan to second guitar, bassist Robert Vickers joined the band. Violinist Amanda Brown would also become a core Go-Between member. In 1989, with a glinting oeuvre behind them, Forster and McLennan decided to break up *The Go-Betweens*. The split was passive yet with an acrimonious wake; the definitive line-up and its flower of romance were sundered for good.

Then, after the mid-'90s, when Forster and McLennan's spot appearances as an acoustic duo reminded critics to overplay *The Go-Betweens'* status as commercial underachievers, ten years had passed, and the two converged musically at the expense of their respective solo careers.

Unfinished Business – A Reformation

Since 2000, The Go-Betweens have once again been creating very good guitar pop. Their sound has evolved from the lush, reverberant baroque fare of the mid-to-late '80s ('*Love Is A Sign*'), into a contemporary folk-rock vein ('*In Her Diary*') with spare keyboard touches and simple, golden lead breaks. Perhaps it's the mining of a terrain McLennan and Forster wanted to explore since finding and then retiring from the pristine pop of 1988's *16 Lovers Lane*. No matter, McLennan's signature invoking of natural elements (fire and rain are running favourites) and gift for melody continue to offset Forster's tense, terse and frequently droll lyricism in a way that will give fans butterfly flutters when the mood is right.



A bit duo-orientated

'No Reason To Cry' "is sweet soul music meets... Air." The Go-Betweens go soul? "Well I don't know, some people have said *16 Lovers Lane* and um, especially *Liberty Belle*...was sort of white soul. I think music that's played with a lot of passion and heartbreak, and love songs - but done honestly - is soul music. It doesn't have to be sung by **Aretha Franklin**"



The Go-Betweens are now Forster, McLennan and two regulars from Forster's solo days - bass babe Adele Pickvance and ex-**Custard** drummer Glenn Thompson. Notably, this line-up is the first to play on successive albums since 1987's *Liberty Belle*. While most fans are lovingly embracing the continued Forster/McLennan partnership and cherish the roles of Pickvance and

Thompson, a detectable ambivalence broils in message boards and dialogue between nostalgic fans. There is an understandable sentiment that things will never be as they were with past favourites Morrison, Vickers and Brown. Indeed the focus of The Go-Betweens has shifted. In the '80s, members almost always adorned the cover art of what Go-Betweens records they played on. But 2000's *The Friends Of Rachel Worth* and now *Oceans Apart* both have cover photography reinforcing the 1978 dynamic of Forster and McLennan *being* The Go-Betweens.

Glenn Thompson concedes in an e-mail that the promotion for the band's last album, *Bright Yellow Bright Orange*, was "a bit duo orientated."

"This time things are a little different. Though the cover shot for *Oceans Apart* is just Robert and Grant, there are more images of the four of us," Thompson says.

"It feels like a four-piece when we're recording and touring, but of course it has been, and always will be, Robert and Grant's band."

McLennan is more matter of fact about his feelings, although he contradicts the message inherent in new Go-Betweens cover art:

"It's (*Oceans Apart*) as much a band record as anything we've ever made."

In making said band record, The Go-Betweens reacquainted with *16 Lovers Lane*'s Mark Wallis. I wonder: was nostalgia involved in choosing the previous producer?

'The Statue' "some one described it as **Bob Dylan**, um, meets the **Pet Shop Boys**, but it all takes place on a Parisian boulevard... it's more like a French pop song."



'This Night's For You' is a song all about the exhilaration of when you meet someone and you just can't get enough of them. Doesn't matter whether it's a lover or a friend. It can also be that experience sometimes when you feel so absolutely blindingly alive that it seems every-thing in the world is just there for you to receive splendour from.



"No, no! No we've actually never done anything for that reason," McLennan says.

"In fact we've avoided that. No it was more that we wanted to make an English pop record. We wanted, rather than *Bright Yellow Bright Orange*, something a bit... bigger; a bit more hi-fi," he explains.

"We knew we wanted to record perhaps in England or Reykjavik at the end of the year. And Mark said, 'oh I have this new studio and we had such a good time doing *16 Lovers Lane*: do you ever want to try out something?'" McLennan says.

'The Mountains Near Dellray' is the second song that, ah, takes place in Tasmania and I think it's a song about rest: about finding peace. In some way it reminds me very much of 'Knocking On Heaven's Door': just in one of the most beautiful melodies and lyrics that Bobby's [Forster] written. I can be quite objective about it: I think we play it magnificently."



"So we had a song which we thought was gonna be the first single. We thought we'd record that. It was right up his alley, and it turned out just, actually, bang, and you know, really amazing; Robert-jumping-around-the-room amazing," McLennan enthuses.

"And the response was just brilliant from everyone who heard it, so we thought, 'alright, then let's do the whole recording.' It turned out absolutely smashing."

Magic In Here – Oceans Apart and More Tales of Teeth

McLennan's excitement should not be confused for smugness. Quick to applaud his friend Forster's song-writing ("He's come up with five of the best things he's ever written, so, shit, that's a good start to a **Go-Betweens** record,"), he explains he "can talk about our music a bit more in the third person as a fan - unlike most groups - because there's two singers."

And as a fan, McLennan doesn't miss Forster's solo albums.

"I think this way it just concentrates the medicine. It's not diluted in any way. It's the five very best things that Robert wants to present and the five things that I want to present, played with the people we want to play with," he says.

'Born To A Family'
"sort of knees-up,
2/4 kind of jump
song"

'Darlinghurst Nights' "is kind of like an epic movie that involves a whole bunch of people living outside the law in Sydney in the early '80s. There's a marching band walking up and down the hill, keeping people awake at all times of the night... It's all completely true. We haven't even changed the names."



"Yeah, it's a magic record. I think we put it all on the line with this record."

I try to imagine what I cannot hear - the magic of an unreleased **Go-Betweens** record and what Arcadian air has blown lovely melodies McLennan's way for so long - when conversation moves towards the mouth of Lucille Ball.

he'll find font in a different publication. He explains L.Ball's claim she received secret Japanese radio broadcasts through fillings in her teeth, then mockingly assures me the Myth Busters recently discredited the beautiful giant of television. Fillings don't pick up radio signals alright. It's a story good for its strangeness and McLennan knows it. He smiles:

"I expect to see this in Semper."

I'm again struck by suspicions McLennan thinks she received secret Japanese radio broadcasts through

'Boundary Rider' "was one that, when we selected what songs we thought would make the best sort of combination, was the reserve. And through some unfortunate circumstances we were able to use 'Boundary Rider'. It was one that we'd recorded in Brisbane after we'd done the album. Robert and I went to a studio up at Mt. Glorious and put it down, and it sounds pretty good: more of a country, open-skied feel, but - if you can imagine - played on a boom box."



♥♥♥ I, I, I, I, I! Love Lee Remick ♥♥♥

Kyle Smith, guitarist and bassist with the woefully named but rather wonderful pop group **Trust Past Lovers** (Robiter's pick for 2005) tells us why he loves Go-Betweens

"I moved to Brisbane in 1994 and quickly became addicted to the local street press. Over the next few years I saw The Go-Betweens name-checked many times, but it wasn't until a couple of years later that I actually heard any of their music (regrettably, I was going through the last throes of my grunge phase at the time). My first real Go-Betweens experience came through Rage late one Saturday night - some canny guest programmer played 'Cattle and Cane'. It was an immediately striking piece of music and I loved it: the sparseness of the music and imagery; the jaunty, stuttering rhythm; the haunting effect of Robert Forster's spoken word; the evocation of a rural Queensland childhood in the title and the lyrics. The video was pretty cool too: the band, in a shed, all fairly static and slightly morose - perfect! I eventually bought the 1998 compilation *Bellavista Terrace* about two years after that and then started collecting the back catalogue on second-hand vinyl. If pressed, I'd probably say 'Five Words' was my favourite Go Between song, because, like 'Cattle and Cane', it's based on the kind of beautifully simple guitar hook that any songwriter would be happy to have written themselves: it's them at their jangly best; it's a perfect pop song and it also seems to be curiously overlooked."