Interview with The Go-Betweens’ Robert Forster

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When bands reunite after a decade’s hiatus, it's usually an attempt to cash a check that's been issued years before. More often than not, there's nothing left in the account but embarrassing nostalgia.

That's not exactly the problem for Australia's Go-Betweens that it might be for, say, Men at Work. Founded by songwriters Robert Forster and Grant McLennan in 1978, the Go-Betweens were never big enough to cash in the first time around. They were always critical darlings, but their knack for signing with ill-fated record companies obscured the quality of their 12-year run. The band's six albums were filled with melodic yet challenging pop-rock that rated among the best music in that genre to emerge from the 80s. From the fervently desolate Talking Headisms of their 1981 debut, *Send Me a Lullaby*, to the sparkling cycle of love songs found on *1988's 16 Lovers Lane*, the Go­ Betweens produced work that should have made them more of a name.

By the end, especially, it was an act of criminal public neglect. Two “best of” collections (*The Go-Betweens 1978-1990* and *Bellavista Terrace: Best of the Go-Betweens*), a release of very early stuff (*78 'Til 79 – The Lost Album* on Jetset) and a Beggars Banquet remastering and reissue of all six studio albums with extensive liner notes garnered more critical attention, but not the well-deserved reexamination.

After folding the band, Forster and McLennan spent the ‘90s issuing solo work of varying qualities. (I’ve always preferred Forster's darker and more sardonic solo work. McLennan's best was his collaboration with the Church's Steve Kilbey on the one-off 1991 eponymous collection, *Jack Frost*.) They decided to reunite and record earlier this year. Their new album, *The Friends of Rachel Worth* (Jetset), is one that stands with all but the very best of their previous work. Not bad for 10 years off the job.

Forster and Mclennan eschewed a full band reunion for a new rhythm section featuring Sleater-Kinney's Janet Weiss on drums and Adele Pickvance on bass. The result is a record with a stripped-down feel more reminiscent of the band's earlier days.

“When we left off,” Robert Forster tells me by phone from Germany, “we were heading in that direction.” He says that various circumstances – the supporting cast, the indie-ready Jackpot studios in Portland where they recorded Rachel Worth – helped create that simpler sound, but he adds that “you never know until you start listening to things back. It's only then that you know, ‘Oh, it’s going to sound like this.’”

Even in the simpler setting, the songs on *Rachel Worth* retain the melodic sparkle and verve that was so appealing in the band's later efforts. When I ask Forster why he and McLennan decided to get back together, he says that a tour that the two songwriters undertook together last year proved decisive. “We always knew that we worked well together,” Forster says. “But it’s the kind of thing that has to be brought up to your face.” The tour, he argues, did just that. “We knew we were getting better as we went along, fine-tuning and fiddling.”

As solid as much of their respective solo work was, the Go-Betweens' juxtaposition of Forster's and Mclennan's often jostling sensibilities was what sparked the band's most fruitful work. Forster's cool and arty depth was an anchor that grounded McLennan's buoyant charm. Forster agrees that such juxtapositions are crucial to the band's appeal. “That’s what we like,” he says. “That’s what we’ve come to appreciate more.”

Forster adds that there's also something less lofty at work as well. “It’s the fact that we’re playing guitars together and singing together on each other’s songs. That's the core of the Go-Betweens’ sound.”

*The Friends of Rachel Worth* puts the dynamics of juxtaposition and collaboration firmly into play. The album literally sways between chiming McLennan songs like “The Clock,” “Magic in Here” and “Going Blind.” and marvelously offhand Forster sketches like “Surfing Magazines” and “German Farmhouse.” The latter is a delightful romp, as its bassline tumbles to a thump and Forster reels off lines like this:

*I lived in seclusion for a couple of years*

*In a German farmhouse, just drinking beer*

*And every morning I woke up*

*With a smile from ear to ear*

“It’s about the time right after the Go-Betweens imploded,” Forster says. “That’s what I wanted to do: sit in a German farmhouse. I was happy to stay in the German farmhouse.”

Another Forster gem on *Rachel Worth* is a wonderfully ambivalent ode to Patti Smith called “When She Sang About Angels.” The song describes a Smith concert with Forster flinging carefully targeted darts at Smith's eccentricities like “When she sang about a boy/ Kurt Cobain/ I thought what a shame/ It wasn’t about/ Tom Verlaine,” and “When she sang about angels/ She looked at the sky/ Anybody else, anybody else/ But I let it go by.” The prettiness of the song’s melody masks the very precise dissection.

Forster says that “When She Sang About Angels” is written “from a real fan’s perspective. When you're a fan and you’re watching someone, it’s irrational. You can complain for half an hour about this or that, but you loved the show.”

Perhaps some of the Go-Betweens' devotees will carp in similar fashion at their CMJ show this week, but on the strength of *The Friends of Rachel Worth*, they'll probably let it go by as well. It's that good.

*– Richard Byrne*