

THE GO-BETWEENS' Liberty Belle and The Black Diamond Express

"She comes from Ireland, she's very beautiful,
I come from Brisbane and I'm quite plain." - The Go-Betweens, Lee Remick



Assuming that you are reading this Brisbane/Replica Firearms issue of *Robiter* cover to cover, you've taken in a few thousand words that have tried to come to terms with the various trials of creating art in Brisbane. Robert Forster did it in two lines. The mind-numbing cultural and geographical distance that separates Brisbane from the more renowned cultural centres of the world. The feelings of inferiority, frustration and futility with that come with being constantly aware of this. 'Lee Remick' didn't just capture the Brisbane experience, it validated it. By placing an Irish starlet beside a desperate and unremarkable young man, Robert Forster suggested that however plain the Brisbane experience might be, there was a way that people from this city could stand alongside the more glamorous souls from the classic cultural capitals.

The path suggested by 'Lee Remick' was one that the Go-Betweens spent their career following and in mid-1985, it had them in London making their fourth and, the general opinion seems to be, finest album - *Liberty Belle and The Black Diamond Express*.

Liberty Belle opens with Robert Forster's 'Spring Rain', a joyous slice of pop that sees its protagonist on the cusp of adulthood with a car, without a date and waiting for the world to dazzle him. Grant McLennan follows it with 'The ghost and the black hat,' a direct, accordion-laced song that completes his triptych of songs concerning his father's death and childhood in Northern Queensland. The previous two songs in this series - 'Dusty In Here' and 'Cattle and Cane' - had formed the backbone of the Go-Betweens second album *Before Hollywood*, the record that cemented the Go-Betweens critical reputation. Thus, the opening numbers of *Liberty Belle*, both focusing on turning points of youth in a very Queensland setting, appear to suggest a return to the formula that previously served the band so well. But this is not the case.

The rest of *Liberty Belle* is a world of variously entangled lovers set against the freezing cold alienation of London winter. New affairs are described with manic enthusiasm, facades are stripped away, men undress with awkwardness and relationships come to bitter and messy ends which go on hurting a lot longer than they should. All the time, as band would later note, love goes on.

Lyricaly, the Go-Betweens are quite plain spoken. Their strength lies in the maturity of their insights and their ability to capture a scene with a few sharp brushstrokes. Forster, in particular, is brilliant in this respect. From the wounded, drawn-out break-up of 'To Reach Me' ("Never thought I'd ever hear from you, my slapped face has healed so has the misunderstanding") to the stupidly dizzy love song, 'Head Full of Steam' ("Her father works, her mother works in exports but that's of no importance at all") he manages to establish both the voice of his characters and the emotional moment perfectly.

McLennan matches him with the album's finest track, 'The Wrong Road,' which combines a string of spartan images with a terrifically lurching waltz and seethes a kind of restrained, graceful anguish for five minutes. It's one of those perfect moments in pop music where a song precisely captures an emotion that you know exists but the English language does not have a word for.

That's pretty much what the Go-Betweens do. Write about the more complex emotions that colour our lives. There a probably only a handful of other artists who have the insight to distinguish these emotions from the straightforward clichés that litter our culture and only a handful of them have the inclination or ability to do them any degree of justice. The Go-Betweens managed this with every album but *Liberty Belle* remains their finest, because it marries a particularly sterling set of songs to the best sound the band achieved on an album.

More spacious and melodic than the albums that preceded it and more tastefully arranged and produced than the albums that followed it, *Liberty Belle* augments the guitar, bass, drums and characteristically wonderful singing of the Go-Betweens with accordions, vibes, pianos, string sections and organs which all serve to enhance the impact of the songs. The result is the Go-Betweens masterpiece. It proves what the band suggested way back in 1978, that people from Brisbane can produce art that measures up with from anywhere else in the world and on top of this, it's a fantastic album by a fascinating band.

- Sebastopold Bloom



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