

# The Success Express

(or The Go-Betweens' Grant McLennan on why he's not a Difficult Bastard)

O shit. Confusion reigns. The intention here was to talk to Go-Betweens' singer/songwriter/guitarist Robert Forster, but it is in fact the other singer/songwriter/guitarist from the band, Grant McLennan, who appears on the other end of the line in Sydney. Time to scrap half the prepared questions, bluff my way through and end up talking about Bondi sewage, cricket, the Chills and the Bay Of Islands ... but that's

irrelevant.

The Go-Betweens, purveyors of undoubtedly some of the finest rock music around, yet still finding fame and fortune eluding their collective grasp, are preparing themselves for a hectic four months that will take in the release of their fourth album *Liberty Belle* and the *Black Diamond Express* and tours of Australia, New Zealand, Britain and Europe .. Grant McLennan takes up the tale:

"I think the last tour of Australia was okay, but in some ways we weren't as happy as a band as we are now. We had a few problems but we've smoothed that over. In all the dates we've played so far here, we've actually been playing really well, so I hope we can keep the momentum up."

And New Zealand?

"O yeah! We're looking forward to coming to New Zealand as we had such a good time last year. It's just the four of us coming — we had the person who played all the things like the accordion (on *Liberty Belle*) in England but not in New Zealand. We also got a friend of ours, Amanda Brown, to play violin in the Sydney gigs, but she's not coming to New Zealand."

The Go-Betweens were infamous for their intense dislike of England. Are they therefore planning to return there in the near future?

"We leave for England on the first of April for a 20-date UK tour, and then off to Europe for four or five weeks."

What's this? Grant sounds suspiciously keen to return to that once-loathed place. A careful enquiry and ...

Surprise! "Very much, very much!



Grant McLennan

Spring's approaching and last year in England was so good for us. We had a good time — relaxed and didn't play that much, just made friends, concentrated on making the record, concentrated on improving our serve in tennis ..."

Wow! If England's so good for the Go-Betweens now, does Grant think that all things are finally starting to look up for the group?

"Yeah, I definitely do! I don't know how much things are going to change, but as far as words like the 'profile' of the band, the 'image' of

the band and 'productivity', much better than it was.

"But all that means in the long run, whether at the end of this year we have to go to another record company, I really haven't a clue. The two record companies we're with at the moment, True Tone in Australia and Beggar's Banquet in England, we're incredibly happy with them ... so maybe the Go-Betweens have found a home, I don't know."

Ah, record companies. The Go-Betweens have had a few in their time, and last year had great difficulty in finding one to release *Liberty Belle* in England. Beggars Banquet eventually came to the rescue, but does this reticence on record companies' part stem from fears of the Go-Betweens' reputation as a 'literate' band?

"I don't think the people who buy records are scared of that. It's the people who are in charge of records, like radio stations, who are frightened of literate rock bands. It's just anyone who's intelligent will worry the people in power."

Are they 'difficult bastards' to deal with then?

"Ha! I've never been called a 'difficult bastard'! Robert and I have been called 'arrogant bastards', we've been called 'damn fools' ... In yesterday's *Sydney Morning Herald* we were called 'the loudmouths of Australian pop', which is quite a remarkable turnaround — a while ago we were the 'lost children', the bookish types of Australian pop! I mean ... do you think I'm a difficult bastard?"

Nah, far from it. But then have their troubles with record companies stemmed from the Go-Betweens eccentricity? Especially with *Liberty Belle* being such an accessible record?

"No, not really. Because what it is, is that you had to be seen to want to participate in that scene in England, and if you wilfully pursue a career independent of it, that's fine and they'll leave you alone."

"But I think that for a long time we've dabbled in rock music, pop music maybe as well, but I think our influences are quite marked, and with a lot of similar bands (Smiths et al) it's quite obvious where they

got their strengths from ... it's just that for the first time last year, we came up with a record that a record company could actually do something with. I just think that for the first time we had the right record. You said it's more accessible and I think it is. We did consciously think about how we were going to record this and removed a lot of excess baggage. And I think it's worked, I really do ... we're all very happy with it."

Time out here readers, to tell you that Grant McLennan is justified in his claims for the LP. Three times through the tape deck on a Saturday morning testify to that — *Liberty Belle* is a gem. And riding over the top of individual songs is a strong sense of unity ...

"I'm glad you got that — that's the thing we all feel as well. After *Spring Hill Fair*, which is a good record, but it jumps around a lot — something we knew when we were going to make it — I think *Liberty Belle* is a lot closer to *Before Hollywood* in that unified vision."

Recording *Spring Hill Fair*, each song was approached individually, so was *Liberty Belle* a conscious attempt at an album as a whole, a complete entity?

"For sure, the album was concerted in that we wrote it, rehearsed it, prepared it in London and recorded it in London and just used London musicians who were friends of ours. It was all done there so in some ways it just all came out of a sustained burst of four or five months last year, and I think it shows."

And what about the rather unusual name, *Liberty Belle* and the *Black Diamond Express*? Any meaning or significance?

"There's nothing special about it. We just liked the way those words fitted together. There is a little bit of a story because there was a record by an old American evangelist in the 20s or 30s and it was called *The Black Diamond Express*. It was all about this train that would go around the country, picking up drunks and gamblers, people like that, and give them help. We thought it was quite a nice touch ..."

And so to the Go-Betweens' bogeyman — fame, popularity and

the pot of gold at the end of the rock 'n' roll rainbow. Why not for them, O Lord, why not?

"Occasionally it's very annoying, but fame is just a part of what we do, of course. If we were megastars, I know we'd do it very well. It wouldn't go to our heads and we wouldn't do ridiculous things. People wouldn't be embarrassed by us if they made us stars."

"But the most important thing, when it all comes down to it, is to be proud of the music you're doing."

I think we're dedicated to that principle, so that's the most important thing.

"I think we all belong at the top anyway. We should have rooms in tall buildings all over the world just waiting for us!"

Supremely optimistic and now hopeful for the future, why the hell not "rooms in tall buildings" for the Go-Betweens, eh? They deserve it, they really do.

Paul McKessar

## After the Rainbow

Auckland will be the venue for a 'No Nukes' style benefit concert early next month, with performances by several international acts together with some of New Zealand's best-known musicians.

The Rainbow Warrior Music Festival is being held at Mt Smart Stadium on April 5 to support the environmental organisation Greenpeace — in particular to raise funds to replace their bombed research vessel, the *Rainbow Warrior*. Coming from the United States to perform at the festival are Jackson Browne, Graham Nash, Bonnie Raitt and Neil Young, all well-known for their concern for the environment. Also included on the programme are three top New Zealand acts, Herbs, the Topp Twins, and, in their first local appearance, Neil Finn and his new band.

The festival is being billed as a family event, so to make it easier for family groups to attend, it will run from midday until dusk at Mt Smart. Children under the age of 10 will be admitted free, on a one-child-to-one-adult basis. Several local promoters have combined forces to produce the festival. "The show will have a tight format, with short sets, so that no one gets bored," says promoter Ian Magan. "The music will be non-stop, with the acts coming on in rapid-fire succession."

Tickets for the festival are only \$18.50 (the acts are performing for expenses only) with all proceeds going towards the pur-



chase and outfitting of a new vessel to replace the *Rainbow Warrior*, bombed last year in Waitemata Harbour. The concert won't buy the whole ship, but will go "a long way towards paying for one," says Carol Stewart of Greenpeace New Zealand.

## New Venue in Auckland

A major live music venue seems like to open in mid-April — one with a capacity of up to 1500. It's the former Dirty Dick's room at 33 Mt Eden Rd, but bacchanalian feasts and buxom waiting wenches will thankfully give way to regular live bands, both local and touring.

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