KEEP YOUR DIGNITY

Ricky Ross and Lorraine McIntosh talk religion, politics, love and death to **Jane Graham** as the couple draw on Johnny Cash and Hank Williams for inspiration on their first album as a duo

'Years ago someone might have told me they were a Deacon Blue fan and I'd think, 'God, is that what our fans really look like? Is that what they wear?' But as you get older you mature and you feel proud of what you've done and you're so grateful that people have loved your efforts."

Lorraine McIntosh – singer, actress and fledgling songwriter – breaks into a huge embracing smile, a regular habit of hers, as she ruminates over how her life has changed in the last two decades. Her music partner and husband of 19 years, Ricky Ross, is equally at peace with how the story has unfolded.

"It used to annoy me that people only knew the singles but over time I've realised, well, what else would they know?" he says, cheerfully shrugging. "I've resigned myself to the way it is and I'm happy with that. And I find it really moving that people have known the songs for 20 years now and they're part of people's lives."

I'm in an upmarket Glasgow eatery to talk to the couple about their first album as a duo, *The Great Lakes* – an evocative, stripped-down endeavour reminiscent of great country partnerships Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris, and The Handsome Family.

As they sit together nursing matching cappuccinos, entirely in tune with each other's mannerisms and thought processes, it strikes me that it's probably taken McIntosh (45), and especially Ross (51), many years to find the calm and contentment they exude today. The overwhelming nature of their early success – Deacons Blue's first two albums both sold millions, spawning seven chart hits between them – and their subsequent embedment in the mainstream Scottish cultural consciousness (only yesterday, McIntosh tells me, she received a photo of two boats moored next to each other, both called, you guessed it, Dignity) threw the lives of the ex-schoolteacher and the trepidatious young girl into freefall.

Yes, they got to tour the world, play to thousands of people and fall in love along the way, but they also had to cope with a level of celebrity that Ross in particular never felt comfortable with (possibly because one of his earliest exposures to it was dealing with the tabloid fall-out of his residual broken marriage) and the subsequent lows of falling sales and dipping popularity.

Neither of them seem natural pop star celebrities – they are both self-deprecating and unpretentious; her open, warm and no-nonsense; him slightly shy and self-examining. It may be significant that it's taken until now, more than 20 years after they first met, for Ross and McIntosh to make their first album alone together. Perhaps even more telling is that this record, to my mind, has more honesty and warmth than any they've ever produced.

"The first time I ever heard Lorraine sing, she and her brother were making their way through *Nebraska* by Bruce Springsteen," Ross remembers.

"I found that album such a dark record, but when she sang it some of the songs came alive and I heard what I love about that record now – that simple Hank Williams structure, three chords, a truth to it. So I wanted our album to be full of those kind of songs."

It's something of a surprise to know the young Lorraine McIntosh was a devotee of Springsteen's strangest, most difficult album, the one seemingly influenced by minimalist Krautrock and New York agresso-punks Suicide, but *The Great Lakes* itself is something of a surprise.

It is, as Ross says, a collection of simply country and folk songs, but it also has a deep melancholy that feels more confessional and complex than the brooding social anxiety Deacon Blue were known for. Ross is a relatively guarded interviewee, but he does admit to some self-doubt.

"I wrote one song – 'Oh the Dark' – when I was working in Nashville," he says. "I felt totally out of my depth, I felt nervous, like I knew nothing, and I was incredibly homesick. I was actually looking for a plane ticket out of there."

McIntosh is more open about her own dark corners. "I'm a happy person but I'm attracted to sad thoughts all the time," she says. "Maybe it's because my mum is Irish, is that where I get it from? I think the Irish have this real relationship with sadness. Surely we all think sometimes, what is the point of this – of falling in love, getting married, having children – it all ends one day. And you'll leave broken hearts behind you."

The premature death of Deacon Blue guitarist Graeme Kelling from pancreatic cancer five years ago still haunts the couple and informs their writing.

"The death of Graham was such a shock, a new kind of loss," says Ross, shaking his head. "He was one of us, we were so close. I say this to [his wife] Julie all the time, there's never a day goes by when I don't think about him, never.

"It made a huge impact because, even now, we see his children growing up and see what he's missing." He heaves a huge, unhappy sigh.

Face to face Ricky Ross is an understated man, thoughtful and cautious, but there is something in his songs that suggests an undertow of torrenting emotions and hypersensitivity.

There's a song on *The Great Lakes* that sounds like an old a cappella spiritual, evoking the torment marked in the songs of The Carter Family or Johnny Cash. It may be indicative that the track – 'Jesus Nailed My Sins' – is not listed, is in fact a 'hidden' track. Is Ricky Ross still grappling with God?

"I think you have to struggle. I think as a songwriter you have to have doubt," he says. "Johnny Cash is a great example of someone who was so confused, but it was the confusion that kept him alive.

"There's a kind of country, like Toby Keith's, that's so certain about Christianity and 'kicking the Iraqi ass' – it's deadly. No, what made Johnny Cash attractive was his struggle with his demons. That's my belief – I struggle every day against my disbelief and that's what keeps me going."

DEACON BLUE'S LYRICS about the rough-end of life for Thatcher's disenfranchised and the band's regular campaigning, against the poll tax and child poverty among other causes, had them pegged as an actively left-wing band, but Ross says he's sick of the 'points-scoring' jousting of party politics and believes his ethical standpoint is now more informed by his religious thinking. Which doesn't mean the couple don't still get fired up about political issues – a single mention of recently-released Lockerbie bomber Abdelbaset Ali al-Megrahi is all it takes to rouse some righteous passion. "I wear my heart on my sleeve on this one," says Ross. "We joined the Facebook group to support Kenny MacAskill. If you're going to have opinions, you must say what you really think."

"I'm very proud of Kenny MacAskill," beams McIntosh. "This was Scotland's first grown up political step and if this is the kind of step we're going to be taking I'm very happy. Scotland made the world sit up, and for such a good reason. It was a brave decision."

Vehement, compassionate, melancholic and music-mad – in many ways Ross and McIntosh are just a typical Glaswegian couple trying to earn a buck. Ironically, *The Great Lakes* – quiet, personal and modest – might be the best thing the multi-selling pop stars have ever made in the process. 1

The Great Lakes (Cooking Vinyl) is out now. McIntoshRoss play Ironworks, Inverness, November 4; Lemontree, Aberdeen, Nov 5 and Oran Mor, Glasgow, Nov 6

'I STRUGGLE DAILY AGAINST MY DISBELIEF. IT KEEPS ME GOING'

RICKY ROSS

REAL GONE KID...
THE DEATH OF DEACON BLUE GUITARIST GRAEME KELLING STILL HAUNTS RICKY ROSS AND LORRAINE MCINTOSH FIVE YEARS ON