D E A C O N B L U E

"Shunning both the tyranny of the dance mix and the coy wimpdom of the jangling juveniles, bands like Deacon Blue place an emphasis on lyrical sensitivity and sophisticated musical resonances... While most pop remains obsessed with the problems and passions of Teen, revelling in an adolescence that is usually bogus, Deacon Blue act their age. They write songs of substance and wordly-wise maturity."

Adrian Thrills, New Musical Express

The scene is Glasgow, Scotland, home to an ever-burgeoning rock scene where every band, according to Deacon Blue's Ricky Ross, "is expected to be either a funky white soul band or some mutant offspring of the Velvet Underground." From their inception, Deacon Blue sidestepped both cliques, concentrating its attention on blue collar life and death with all the compassion and humanity of seasoned veterans.

Considering the band only organized itself into existence less than two and a half years ago, where did all this "worldly-wise maturity" come from?

"There's a man I meet, walks up our street, he's a worker for the council, has been twenty years
And he takes no lip off nobody, and litter off the gutter, puts it in a bag, and never thinks to mutter
And he packs his lunch in a "Sunblest" bag, the children call him Bogie, he never lets on but I know 'cause he once told me
He let me know a secret about the money in his kitty, he's gonna buy a dinghy, gonna call her 'Dignity'."

Few songs have captured the imagination of serious British listeners over the years in quite the way that Deacon Blue's twice-released composition "Dignity" has. Cutting to life's melodrama with the economy of an Anglo-Saxon ballad and the intelligent conviction of a singer-songwriter you should trust, Ricky Ross has succeeded in sending chills up and down the spine of English music.

RAINTOWN, Deacon Blue's debut album, fairly sweats with the same grim ambience as Glasgow itself, the city the band calls home. An overwhelming sense romantic optimism pervades the album, from the hurricane force of the opening prologue, "Born In a Storm" and the homage to drizzly Caledonia, "Raintown," to the closing moments of "Town To Be Blamed" -- "Work, work, work/Rain, rain, rain/Home, home, home, again."

Along the way, we are introduced to a cast of characters who wouldn't be out of place in Grapes of Wrath or Bound For Glory: the ragdoll and her make-believe "Ragman"; aging Hiroshima photographer Harold Agnew, "He Looks Like Spencer Tracy Now"; Alan, who doesn't understand the "Chocolate Girl"; and of course the homesick council worker who sails away on "the ship called Dignity." Ross' notion of a love song is best observed in the endless chasing, searching, and waiting of "When Will You (Make My Telephone Ring)," Deacon Blue's newest British single.

"It's almost as if the Tom Waits, Van Morrison, Associates, and Ronnie Spector tapes that litter the floor of their tour bus are the standards this band are out to better. Deacon Blue know the essence of what is and what should always be. They want to make you laugh so loud those around will think you're barmy, hurt so deep the scars will never heal. They want to whisk you off on a whim yet want you to still be with them years after the initial romance has faded."

Mat Smith, Melody Maker

Deacon Blue came into being in December, 1985. Ricky Ross, a former school teacher and youth leader in Dundee, moved to Glasgow in '83. "I used to get really hung up about my background when I was young," he told the NME. "I used to think it had no romance. Compared to the other kids at school, it always seemed so dull. I was brought up in a very religious family, very strict. I wouldn't even be able to go out and play football on Sundays, that sort of thing.

"But I reached a turning point," he continued, "when I realized that my background was actually quite rich and quite unusual. I realized then that everybody's background could be as interesting as they wanted it to be. I decided to think of my own in more colorful terms and that gave me a great inheritance in words, phrases and experiences that I still draw on when I write songs."

Ricky's love of the folk element is apparent, "handing down songs from one performer to the next and from one generation to the next. I'd never claim that Deacon Blue were a folk group, because it is obvious that we aren't. But I'd like to be able to write songs as good as some of the great folk songs like 'Deportees' by Woody Guthrie. There's a hard realism about these songs that is missing from most rock music." He goes on to cite Bruce Springsteen as as example of a songwriter who "brings his own background to life... Once you grow up enough to accept and come to terms with it, your background can be a great thing."

In Glasgow, Ross discovered a hotbed of artistic and musical talents, all looking for an escape. The only problem was finding players who weren't already in a band. He found his first kindred spirit in drummer Dougie Vipond. When they came across guitarist Graeme Kelling, he was gigging in no fewer than three bands. The lineup was completed by bassist Ewen Vernal and Jim Prime on keyboards (who has gone on to co-write several Deacon Blue songs with Ricky Ross).

They began playing some of the city's smaller venues (The Fixx, Club Eden) in early '86. After the addition of backing vocalist Lorraine McIntosh (described by NME as "a diminutive Betty Boop lookalike with a vivacious singing voice"), Deacon Blue started to attract a core following around town. The inevitable interest from London's record scene was piqued by the band's premiere at the Marquee Club in November '86.

CBS Records heard the potential and in March '87 issued the first single, "Dignity" b/w "Riches" (B side unavailable on LP; the first in a long stretch of non-LP flip sides for the group). The sides were produced by Jon Kelly (whose credits include Kate Bush, Paul McCartney, and the Damned). Working from the bottom upwards, Deacon Blue achieved a reputation as a hard-working band whose recordings only told part of the story. A second single followed in May, "Loaded," the same month that RAINTOWN was released. In September came the third single, "When Will You (Make My Telephone Ring)."

By the autumn-winter season, Deacon Blue was headlining the U.K. and making forays into Europe for gigs in Germany, Spain, France, Holland, and Italy. In a rare move, U.S. producer Bob Clearmountain enlisted to record a new single version of "Dignity." Issued around Christmastime, in no less than five vinyl and CD configurations, the song reached #31 on the national chart and LP sales doubled. Deacon Blue, now appearing in 2,000-seat halls across the country, would go on to sell-out in advance two shows at Barrowlands in in Glasgow.

"When you're young and you read other people's experiences of life -- James Joyce living in Dublin, George Orwell living in Burma," Ricky observes, "you begin to think how your own experiences could compare. Then you realize that they're just taking one experience and magnifying it. And you begin to value your own family and background and realize that they are unique. You have to realize those strong points."

Deacon Blue is about to find out that America realizes those strong points, too.

"And I'll sail her up the West Coast, through villages and towns
I'll be on my holidays, and they'll be doing their rounds
They'll ask me how I got her, I'll say I saved my money
They'll say isn't she pretty, that ship called Dignity."

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