

The Divine Comedy - an acquired taste

Sometimes, the unexpected happens. The Divine Comedy sneaked out their third album back in April and for some strange reason, people noticed this time round. Maybe it was due to the success of bands like Pulp who brought intelligent pop music back into the spotlight. Or maybe it was single-handedly due to Radio One DJ Chris Evans who played 'Something For The Weekend' as frequently as was legally possible until people started buying it. But whatever the reason, the music world should breathe a sigh of relief because it means that Neil Hannon has a new incentive to keep writing - lots of people are actually listening, instead of just a select few.

The Divine Comedy formed all the way back in 1989, but after three not-too-bad releases, they split. They split, that is, except for songwriter Neil Hannon who immersed himself in the likes of Scott Walker. He re-emerged in 1993 with a new sound and their first real album, *Liberation*. His songs now had a more 'classic' feel that was an amalgam of Noel Coward, Stephen Sondheim, Burt Bacharach and, of course, Scott Walker - some labelled him pretentious while others welcomed him as a breath of fresh air in the increasingly stagnant music scene of the time.

Since then, Britpop has come along, and suddenly UK bands are a hot commodity. So much so that Setanta Records (The Divine Comedy's label) has opened a US office, and has just released their third album, *Casanova*, to near-universal praise. It is a concept album (of sorts) that explores the world of love, and all the highs and lows that accompany it. And it manages to do so in a funny, easy-to-swallow way, thanks to skilful writing and a keen ear for a good tune. I had a chance to talk to Neil Hannon and delve a little into the world of The Divine Comedy.

So what were you up to during the past two years since the last album?

I started off by enjoying the summer and didn't do much at all. I had a bit of writer's block and couldn't think what to write about at all, and then ended up on the usual subject of rock and roll. Then after I finished writing the album, it took a long time to get everything organised and recorded since it was quite a big project. When we finally got into the studio, we didn't come out again for eight months because the record company gave us too much money. So all in all, it was just problem after problem after problem.

But it seemed to pay off as The Divine Comedy are having some commercial success at long last - two Top 40 hits no less. How does that feel?

Very nice, thank you. It's quite a relief really as there was a lot invested in this record, and so we couldn't have settled for the level of success we had before.


So what are you going to do with all the money?

Even if I did have it, I really don't know. It's hard to find time to spend money these days because I'm so busy.

Do you think you will see some similar success in the US this time round?

I don't really know, but it frightens the hell out of me. It would be nice though. My piano player and I are coming over for the CMJ conference, and we're going to do a few acoustic gigs - we're being very wimpy about it. But I hope that we will get over there eventually with the band.

For the unfamiliar, how would you sum up The Divine Comedy in thirty words or less?

 Soundcheck

Umm... sort of interesting... nice tunes... confusing lyrics... plenty of pomposity and plenty of self-deprecation.

The very obvious theme to *Casanova* is love and sex, and there have been charges made that you are a little obsessed - would you care to defend yourself?

Naw - why bother? I am guilty, but totally innocent at the same time.

There are a couple of songs that are a little on the smutty side. Do you think that this 'nudge-nudge' element is a very British thing?

I think so. Smut is something that the British have always been very good at. Everybody else just accepts sex and everything without any real problems while the British are just one huge nation of hang-ups so the only way that they can approach sex is by giggling behind the bike sheds. So the only way I could approach it was through humour - it's just too strange otherwise.

On 'Becoming More Like Alfie', you seem to be celebrating the 'lad culture' where it is acceptable to be sexist and chauvinistic...

Well, I wouldn't say that I celebrate it.

...maybe not celebrate, but to the casual listener it might appear that you are.

Yes, I suppose it could be seen as such.

Are you worried that the irony might be lost on some people?

Well that's kind of funny - if people go around singing it without actually realising that it's ironic, they are actually a walking joke. I have no problem with that. It is just perfect. On '...Alfie' I am just concerned about me showing signs of laddishness, and wondering whether I am in fact a complete git. Luckily I have worked out that I am not, and I am a lovely, lovely man.

There seems to be an autobiographical element to some of your songs. Is that the case?

Sometimes I seem to be parodying my own life - in 'The Frog Princess' there are a few grains of truth, but not too many. So I take something from my own life, and then exaggerate it wildly and blow it up out of all proportion. That's what I like to do. My life is just too boring and tedious otherwise.

When you did a feature with *Select* magazine, they sent a psychologist to do the interview - what was that like? Was it very bizarre?

The problem was that she was so good that her voice soothed me and I opened up and spilled the beans. It was very silly of me, and I regretted it later - my entire personal life was all over a national magazine, and so I felt more than a little naked.

The other aspect of your fame at the moment is your involvement with British comedy show called *Father Ted*. Could you tell me a little about that?

The writers of the show are big fans of mine, so they just called me up and asked me if I would write some music for it. So I went into the studio and made some thoroughly amateurish music, and they seemed to like it for some unknown reason.

And one song you wrote was for an episode about the Eurovision Song Contest...

Yes. Because Ireland keep winning, the two priests in the programme try to come up with the worst possible Irish entry so they lose for once and don't have to spend all that money on putting it on. So I wrote two of the worst songs ever written, one of which is called 'My Lovely Horse', and it is absolutely vile. But for some



Neil Hannon demonstrates that he blew some of his cash advance on a nice holiday

reason, everybody loved it - just because it was so horrible and sickly sweet, I think. Now everybody keeps pressuring us to put it out as a single. But I'm not going to because it would be morally wrong to put out a piece of music which is so morally detestible just because everybody seems to like it. The people from the show can release it if they like, but I just want to remind people that it was meant to be shit, and not to take it so seriously.

You managed to make it to Abbey Road to record one of the songs on *Casanova*, 'The Dogs And The Horses' - what was that like?

It was great. It seems like an epoch ago, but I just got to live out my dreams of being Scott Walker. There was a massive orchestra in front of me in Studio Two, and me in my little booth with my shades and earphones on. I had one hand holding my earphones to my ear - very cool - just like Agnetha on that Abba record 'Thank You For The Music'. And there was one of those huge microphones that look like a donkey's...you know. I'm not sure if it was the best orchestral recording ever, but it was certainly a giggle.

Your fondness for Scott Walker is rather obvious when listening to your albums - are you still a fan?

I haven't listened to him for ages just because it came through so obviously on this record, so I think it is time I stop or else I will simply become Scott Walker.

And you send him a copy of each of your albums as they come out - have you ever heard back?

No, not directly. But once he did mention us in an interview he did with *Melody Maker* - he said that we were really off the wall. And I thought that was really nice coming from him - I mean, you can't get any more off the wall than his last album.

So what is next for The Divine Comedy?

Well, we're doing the Reading Festival, and various other things. We're releasing another single from the album in October/November, and then touring Europe and Britain again. It'll never stop, and I'll be old and grey in a just few years. Isn't success great? I'm so glad that I started all this...

Selected Discography

1993 - *Liberation*



1994 - *Promenade*



1996 - *Casanova*

(all are full-length albums and are released on Setanta Records)