

A True Hipster

Robert Forster on Grant McLennan

On 6 May, on a Saturday afternoon while preparing a housewarming party, Grant McLennan, a friend and working partner of mine for 30 years, died of a heart attack. He was 48 years old. This is a remembrance.

Grant and I started the Brisbane band The Go-Betweens in January 1978. We'd met two years earlier in the drama department at the University of Queensland, where we were both doing Bachelor of Arts degrees centred mainly on English literature. Most of the drama subjects were taught at a small off-campus theatre called the Avalon. It was a jostling atmosphere in which Grant and I felt immediately at home, and our friendship began and blossomed here, amid the costume trunks, the works of Beckett, Genet and Ionesco (perfect for a pop band), and a genial professor, an Englishman by the name of Harry Garlick. It was action, and fun, and good learning, and it's where The Go-Betweens started.

Grant was a whiz-kid when I first met him. His passion was film. He was either going to be a director or the greatest film critic this country had ever seen. At 18, he was writing reviews for a publication called *Cinema Papers*, while working at the Schonell, the campus cinema where he assisted with the programming. At 19, he'd done his BA. It was as if he'd raced so hard, and with such brilliance, that he'd got slightly ahead of himself. His application for the film and television school in Sydney was turned down on the grounds that he was too young. Which is where I came in, to fill a gap that was to be merely a year or two, before further adventures took us elsewhere.

While Grant had been pouring himself into film, I'd been falling into music. My academic record at university was patchy beside his. I never finished the degree. The electric guitar and stirrings overseas sighted in the music press

were starting to consume me. Grant knew I had a band with a university friend and a drummer, and this intrigued him. The band, which went under two names, The Mosquitoes (taken from *Gilligan's Island*) and The Godots (from Beckett), only did three shows over two years, of which Grant saw the last two. At the final show, we played the first good song I thought I'd written. It was called 'Karen'.

The similarities between us were strong. We were both private-school boys who'd done well academically but come out of the system with no idea of a career. We were both looking for something that bohemian-free Brisbane couldn't offer, except in the traditional, safe form of an Arts degree. And we were both uneasy and difficult, having emerged from families who looked on somewhat bewildered at the eldest sons they had produced. When Grant and I met, we didn't know it but we'd found each other. Rough mirror-images. And when the friendship that had begun in classes grew to the point where I visited his house and saw his bedroom stacked with film books, novels and posters, I realised his "thing", film, wasn't just an enthusiasm; it was an obsession. And I knew that was exactly how I felt about music.

We began a slow exchange. He told me about French new wave cinema and film noir. I told him about the greatness of the Velvet Underground. He told me about auteur theory and the genius of Preston Sturges. I told him about Dylan in the mid-'60s. He mentioned Godard and Truffaut. We became Godard and Truffaut. Brisbane didn't know it at the time, but there were two 19-year-olds driving around in a car who thought they were French film directors.

So we started the band when he accepted my offer to teach him bass guitar. But it was more than that. It was the decision to pool our ambitions and resources and go for something greater than ourselves, and in this we were aided by one piece of luck: Grant was musical. He could have remained a film

student who played the bass, but instead he quickly became a musician. He had a fantastic singing voice and a perfect melodic knack, unknown when I asked him to start the group. What I did know was that, given his obvious creative tendencies, he would write songs. That it took only six weeks surprised me. But after such a short time, he showed me a bass riff, I wrote a chorus, and it became the first Forster–McLennan composition. It was called ‘Big Sleeping City’, and we played it for a year.

Being in a band and releasing our first single – ‘Lee Remick / Karen’, in September 1978 – gave us a certain instant notoriety, which we both enjoyed. For Grant it gave him things at 20 that a film career mightn’t have handed him until he was 30: recognition, creative adventure, the instant smell that we were going places. The journey had begun. The first vial of our friendship was put aside and we became The Go-Betweens. And from then on we set off on the crusade, with the band as first priority in our lives. We travelled, recorded, added and lost members, and built up the best body of work we could until we crashed 11 years later. Occasionally, through these years, Grant and I would catch each other’s eye – as we flew into New York, or played a big Danish rock festival, or went on a French TV show – and think this is what we did it for, these pop moment milestones that both of us had dreamed of back in Brisbane, at the beginning.

Through all of this we stayed good friends. There was something special about our friendship that we could take deep into our work, making crucial creative decisions along the way and never flaring up or tearing at each other. We operated on two rules: each was to have the same number of songs on every album, and we both had to agree on something before we did it. Our confidence in what we could do was amazing. It was if being in The Go-Betweens gave us an invisible shield, allowing us to believe that nothing could knock us out. Grant was central to this. Every album was “our best so far”, and any time I dipped in confidence he was there to pick me up. He was

a great working partner. Not only the songs – ‘Cattle and Cane’, ‘Bachelor Kisses’, ‘Bye Bye Pride’, ‘Streets of Your Town’, ‘Finding You’, ‘Boundary Rider’ – but also as an up-close inspirational artist in my life.

This is what he was like. I’d drive over to his place to play guitar and he’d be lying on a bed reading a book. Grant never felt guilt about this. The world turned and worked; he read. That was the first message. He’d offer to make coffee, and I knew – and here’s one of the great luxuries of my life – I knew I could ask him anything, on any artistic frontier, and he’d have an answer. He had an encyclopaedic mind when it came to the arts, and his knowledge always had a personal twist. So, as he worked on the coffee, I could toss in anything I liked – something that had popped up in my life that I needed his angle on. I’d say, “Tell me about Goya,” or, “What do you know about Elizabeth Bishop’s poetry?” or, “Is the Youth Group CD any good?” And, his head over the kitchen table, he’d arch an eyebrow just to ascertain that I was serious, which I always was. Then he’d start. Erudite, logical, authoritative and never condescending – not one ounce of superiority came with the dispensing of his opinion. God. I’m going to miss that. And of all the holes his departing has left, this for me is the largest: the person you can go to who is so much on your wavelength, stocked with shared experience, whom you don’t ask for life advice (Grant would be one of the last people there!) but who, as a fellow artist, you can go toe to toe with and always come away totally inspired by. Well, that’s a great thing.

And it wasn’t only me. Since his death, his role as inspirer and informer has come out strongly in remembrance. An old friend, Steve Haddon, says, “Meeting Grant in 1976 was like getting an education.” Another friend, Andrew Wilson, writes, “Thank you for playing ‘Johnny Jewel’, *Blonde on Blonde*, and Jane Birkin to me in a wooden Spring Hill room.” Of the 1500 responses that quickly sprung up on the internet, many spoke of a meeting with Grant, in a bar, a café, somewhere in the world, when he told them

something of someone – made an inspired artistic connection, a tip that these people carried with them. His place here is as a true hipster, in the 1940s and '50s sense of the word. Someone perched on the streets, in the saloons, on the lower side of life, possessing razor-sharp and deep knowledge of the cultural front – but never lording it in the traditional manner. Half jokingly, I once suggested he return to academia. He laughed the idea off, preferring to be the secret holder of wisdom “on a barstool throne”.

The break-up of the band in 1989 was savage and abrupt. Grant and I had had enough. We'd written six lauded albums and the band was broke. In the end, we were doing Sydney pub gigs to pay ourselves wages. It was a nasty treadmill. Grant and I had planned to go off as a duo and do an acoustic album, but this got blown sky-high when his girlfriend left him on the day she was told the band was over. The next weeks were chaos. Grant was destroyed. I stayed, consoling him and trying to make sense of the mess that we had brought on by trying to gain our freedom. Then I had to follow my own heart and return to Germany, where I'd found a new life over the last six months. The duo idea hit the rocks when Grant informed the record company he wanted a solo career. The fact that he told them before me hurt. But he had a girlfriend to try to win back – though, as it turned out, that was unsuccessful.

For the remainder of the decade we had fulfilling solo careers. It was great to work alone and to grow. And every eighteen months or so, an offer would come in from some part of the world, attractive enough for Grant and I to do a one-off acoustic show together, catch up, and then go back to our own lives.

There was one other thing, though: the film script. This was a crazy dream dating back to the late '70s. When Grant and I started working together, *The Go-Betweens* was to be the calling card, the most visible and instantly attractive thing we did. Behind it, we had a number of other ideas we were

going to unleash upon the world once the band was famous, which our twenty year old minds figured would be in about three years. It was the Orson Welles theory: get famous at one thing, and then bring on everything else you can do. So there was a film and a book in the wings. The film was a jewel-heist caper set on the Gold Coast and then Sydney, a vehicle aimed at our favourite American actor of the time, James Garner. The book was going to be a microscopic dissection of and ode to our favourite pop-star of all time, Bob Dylan, and it was going to be called 'The Death of Modern America: Bob Dylan 1964-66' (which still sounds like a great book title to me).

Neither got beyond rough fragments, though the wish to write a film together stayed. So, in 1995, with both of us back in Brisbane, we spent three months in the bowels of the Dendy cinema in George Street writing a film called 'Sydney Creeps'. It was wonderful being in a room together working on something other than music, though the script is not as good as it should be. The wrestling over each line and plot twist robbed it of flow and a strong voice. Still, it was done, and there it was: a thick notebook written in longhand, many lines crossed out and written over, lying in a trunk of Grant's last possessions.

We reconvened the band in 2000. Over the next six years we recorded three albums, toured, and took the whole thing, to our great pleasure, up another level. We were on the cusp of something. It's strange to say that about a band that had existed for 17 years, but with Adele and Glenn, our bass player and drummer, by our side, all doors still felt open. We were still up for the championship, and we had a growing audience willing us on to bigger and better things. And we had new songs: Grant had a fantastic batch for an album we were going to do next year. I said to him that all my writing up until the recording would just be catching up to what he had. Album number ten was going to be something special.

Yet he wasn't happy. He was proud of the band's recent success, and his private life, after a long bumpy ride, was settled; in general, he was the most contented and up I'd seen him in a long time. But deep down, there remained a trouble, a missing piece that he was always trying to find and that he never did. Family, a loving girlfriend, a circle of friends: all could count for so much, and it was a hell of a lot, but it could never cover over a particular hurt. When Grant was four, his father died. Perhaps it stemmed from this. He was moody, and you always hoped you got him on a good day. Sometimes I'd visit and it would take me an hour to pull him out. Twice in his life I was with him when he was totally shattered. And there were many years I missed when we weren't in the same city.

I can remember being hit by the lyrics he put to his first songs. I was shocked by their melancholy and the struggle for joy. I'd known the happy-go-lucky university student. As soon as he wrote, there it was. Any appreciation or remembrance of Grant has to take this into account. He didn't parade it, but it's all over his work, and it was in his eye.

His refuge was art and a romantic nature that made him very lovable, even if he did take it to ridiculous degrees. Here was a man who, in 2006, didn't drive; who owned no wallet or watch, no credit card, no computer. He would only have to hand in his mobile phone and bankcard to be able to step back into the gas-lit Paris of 1875, his natural home. I admired this side of him a great deal, and it came to be part of the dynamic of our pairing. He called me "the strategist". He was the dreamer. We both realised, and came to relish, the perversity of the fact that this was an exact reversal of the perception people had of us as artists and personalities in the band – that I was the flamboyant man out of time and Grant the sensible rock. In reality, the opposite was true.

The last time I saw him was about two weeks before he died. The circumstances of the visit were the same as they'd been for almost 30 years: to

play guitar together and do the catch-up with an old friend. He had a two-storey granny flat at the back of the house he lived in, and we played on a small deck there. A railroad track runs behind the house, and occasionally trains passed through the songs. We took breaks from the playing, and talked; we had such fun together. Talking. Always talking and gossiping – silly stuff we'd go round and round on.

After four hours I left. He was standing on the front veranda as I walked down to the front gate. In the mailbox was a wrapped copy of the *New York Review of Books*. I took it out and looked at the cover. I called to him, saying I didn't know he got this. He told me he had a subscription, and if I wanted to I could borrow back-issues. I thanked him, said I would and then said goodbye. As I walked to the car and got in, I wondered how many singer-songwriters or rock stars in the world got the *New York Review of Books* delivered on subscription. Not many, I thought. Maybe just one.

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