

SWEETE DREAMS

An ode to life in the Deep South, Bobbie Gentry's *The Delta Sweete* was under-appreciated following its release in 1968. Five decades later, indie veterans Mercury Rev enlisted an all-star cast of female vocalists to revisit what has become a cult classic. **Daniel Dylan Wray** finds out why.

This year marks 30 years since the birth of

Mercury Rev, and across that time they have traversed an eclectic and engulfing terrain of sounds.

From earlier explorations in noisy psychedelic eruptions to later crafting deft, tender and dreamy compositions, they even ended up as unexpected ostensible pop stars in the UK with the huge success of 1998's *Deserter's Songs*, a benchmark album that has retained such a degree of love and potency that 2018 saw them tour the album and play it in its entirety.

However, for their latest move forward the group have dipped back 50 years into musical history. In 1968, the country singer Bobbie Gentry followed up her No.1 album *Ode To Billie Joe* with *The Delta Sweete*, a concept album about life in the Deep South.

Yet success didn't follow, with the album never topping No.132 in the same Billboard chart she had previously knocked The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* off the top of with her debut. Mercury

Rev have re-recorded the somewhat forgotten cult classic in full with a series

ALL-STAR CAST

The *Delta Sweete's* guest vocalists in full

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 Okolona River
Bottom Band
Norah Jones | 7 Tobacco Road
Susanne Sundfør |
| 2 Big Boss Man
Hope Sandoval | 8 Penduli Pendulum
Vashti Bunyan,
Kaela Sinclair |
| 3 Reunion
Rachel Goswell | 9 Jessye Lisabeth
Phoebe Bridgers |
| 4 Parchman Farm
Carice van Houten | 10 Refractions
Marissa Nadler |
| 5 Mornin' Glory
Laetitia Sadier | 11 Courtyard
Beth Orton |
| 6 Sermon
Margo Price | 12 Ode To Billie Joe
Lucinda Williams |



of guest vocalists: a different woman singing on each of the 12 songs.

The band's singer, Jonathan Donahue, felt compelled by forces unknown to him to take on the album. "I really enjoyed the record for years before I brought up the idea," he says. "But beyond that, it seemed to be a wind in the sail I couldn't see. There seemed to be something quite invisible moving me towards it and I'm not quite sure what that is. Even today." The album was ingrained in the band's psyche, featuring on heavy rotation for years. "John and I would listen to *The Delta Sweete* back when we were on

tour with *See You On The Other Side*," says the band's Sean 'Grasshopper' Mackowiak. "So it became a soundtrack for us when driving through America." There's also a stronger thematic link between the album the band were touring at the time and the one they would listen to constantly. "*The Delta Sweete* wasn't that well received at the time, it was beyond its time," says Donahue. "We felt some feelings of sympathy about that from our experiences with *See You On The Other Side*, which was a record that just didn't reach anyone at all. There was a certain resonance to it."

However, as soon as the band began to work on their versions of the songs, it became clear a different approach was needed to usual. "The only way into this album, to be wholly inside of it, was through female vocals," Donahue says. "It was clear as a bell to me right away. I didn't have any idea who would sing on it, but as soon as I began singing it became really, really clear that it wasn't meant for me. For me to fully understand this album I had to go beyond what I knew and even what I wanted to do, to sing it myself, and to step away from it."

VERY SPECIAL PROJECT

Next came the long list of their favourite singers and desired collaborators, but another small bump in the road greeted them. "Initially, we had asked a bunch of young women," Donahue says. "And surprisingly, I won't name names, the response was very luke warm. I don't know if they had the emotional connection to the music, it just seemed to bounce back to us. It was quite bewildering at first. I held Bobbie in such a reverent place that the idea that a woman wouldn't want to sing on it really took me by surprise at first. Then I came to the realisation that it probably just wasn't the right voice for that song. Then when we began to approach further, the right women were just revealed to us."

The list of contributors is an impressive one and includes Lucinda Williams, Hope Sandoval, Beth Orton, Margo Price, Marissa Nadler, Norah Jones, Vashti Bunyan and Laetitia Sadier. It was one voice that elevated the project to something bigger, however, according to Donahue. "One of the big turning points of the record, that switched it from being a project that might be a cassette



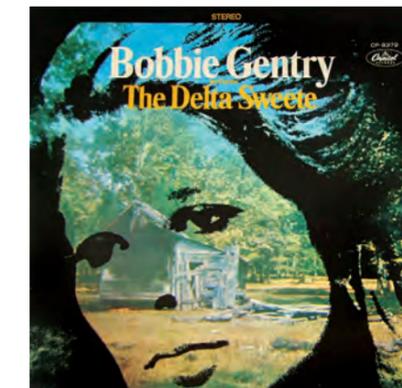
Bobbie Gentry shot to fame with her self-penned classic *Ode To Billie Joe*, but chose to retire from the public eye in the early 80s

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for friends and into something that you're hearing now, is when Lucinda agreed to do it. That seemed to confirm our inklings that maybe this was a project bigger than Mercury Rev." From then on, everything ran velvet-smooth. "It's a very special project," says Grasshopper. "It flowed out of us really naturally. It was fun and nobody was fighting – and it doesn't always happen that way."

The aim, Grasshopper says, was to "create our own world view of it. To recreate it in our own way." Donahue was precious about the album and didn't want to spoil it or tamper with it too much. "The approach we had wasn't one that was calculated towards something. I didn't want to raise some forgotten, abandoned shipwreck of *The Delta Sweete*. To me, it wasn't forgotten or abandoned, it was still, and still is, very vibrant. I didn't want to go down and start pulling things off and opening it up and watch it rust before my eyes. I was really conscious of that. To me, it was really alive.

It was like discovering an island that was fully formed rather than wanting to go down and dust off some tomb somewhere and prove to people that we were on some archaeological dig and had found something people had previously walked away from.



I really wanted to shine a light on it, a Mercury Rev lamp."

The band wrote most of the music up front, with Donahue doing guide vocals, and then some of the contributors were brought into their studio to record and others worked remotely. What started to come back began to floor the group.

"From a male perspective, I could only see into it so far," Donahue says. "But once the female vocals landed on the tracks it was like that moment in *The Wizard Of Oz* when things go from black and white to colour. I was grateful to myself for stepping back and allowing the women to sing on it. It's probably one of the best moments I've had musically – actually not doing something. Just allowing that empty space to be occupied by the spirit of something much different and much bigger than me."

The result is a record that hums with the trademark sounds of Mercury Rev: flowing, floating melodies and dreamy immersive



Mercury Rev's Grasshopper and Jonathan Donahue are both delighted with the results of their personal passion project



A LEAP OF FAITH

It leaves the project in a unique place, in that touring it opens up a whole world of logistical difficulties. "If you look at the names on the album, touring it would be like getting 12 kittens in a basket," says Donahue. "It would be quite difficult, but we have received a lot of interest to perform it, so it might be on the horizon." Grasshopper sees maybe doing one-off shows in key cities to be an option, a little like John Cale and his guest performers taking on The Velvet Underground's seminal debut (which Mercury Rev were involved with). "We would love to do some shows and get



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Mercury Rev's *The Delta Sweete Revisited* is available now from Bella Union on 180g vinyl

soundscapes that are at once both grand and deeply intimate, yet a lick of original country flavour is left to drift around the compositions and guest vocals. For Donahue, the guest vocals capture a profound sense of intimacy. "The way that a number of the women returned the tracks,

I can't be certain of how they recorded them, but the intimacy on the vocals when they are isolated, it does sound like maybe a few of them were just in their bedroom recording. It has that close proximity, emotionally." However, with Bobbie Gentry in a state of self-imposed exile it's unlikely she'll ever hear the results of this project. But for Donahue that was never the point. "Early on, I was quite resolute about that. That we would respect the fact that Bobbie is in Bobbie's own world. I didn't want to disturb that or put her in a position where she would have to come out of that. I want to respect that."

a bunch of the singers, and maybe a few others who couldn't record with us at the time – similar to how we worked with John Cale. It could work in that context." In the meantime, the pair will settle for having produced an album that has evolved to a place and form way beyond their dreams or expectations. "We're all over the moon about the result," Donahue says. "It's one of those records that just keeps getting better to my ears, which isn't always the case. Sometimes some records don't last as long as you imagine they would when you leave the studio, but this one just keeps opening up to me. There was a large leap of faith involved in the whole idea that this project was meant to be." ●