



## The Return of the Gentlemen Amateurs

**A palpable case of quality over quantity, The Blue Nile have weathered record company politics and internal strife to produce *High*, their first album for eight years. Leader Paul Buchanan tells David Davies about the bravery required to scrap months of work, the struggle to remain true to your values, and why songwriting is really not so different from sheep-herding...**

Paul Buchanan, the singer and chief songwriter of The Blue Nile, is attempting to explain just how you piece years of on-and-off work into something quite as coherent as the band's new album, *High*. Fortunately, he has an unlikely analogy to hand.

"It's kind of like keeping your sheep together – you go running after whichever one has wandered down the hill," he says. "You go after it and then get halfway up the hill, then you look and see another one has wandered off. So you get that and bring it up, and then two of them move up the hill and you think, Right, I'd better get the other ones up there. I was almost going to say you end up driving your sheep into the corral. I can't even get my wildlife right now!"

Any zoological oversights can be forgiven, not least because Paul Buchanan has spent a good portion of the eight years since *Peace At Last* simply trying to keep the band together. By Buchanan's own admission, the period in which that album emerged was not the happiest for all concerned. Signed to a major label (Warners) then too embroiled in a corporate shakedown to pay full attention to such a tender artefact as a Blue Nile album, the trio – Buchanan, bassist Robert Bell and keyboard player Paul Joseph Moore – began to question exactly where they had ended up.

"We had a little bit of a rough patch," admits Buchanan, softly spoken and modest to a fault. "We're notoriously polite people, and we had to publicly represent the work and just try and co-operate with everybody – and eventually it got very difficult. There were many things where I just thought, This is actually holding up the process now. It's like a footballer doing too many fashion ads – it starts to disrupt the football."

Label-less once more and looking for a unifying goal after several traumatic years, The Blue Nile began a search

to recapture the intangible magic that had infused their first two albums, *A Walk Across the Rooftops* (1983) and *Hats* (1989). Still one of the most original debuts to be released by an act affected in even the slightest way by the vagaries of pop, *Rooftops* was a highly visual piece of work, its combination of judicious atmospheric and Buchanan's surging vocals – best captured on 'Tinseltown in the Rain' – evoking the traffic-clogged, rain-lashed vistas of their hometown, Glasgow. The beautifully-measured follow-up, *Hats* – the result of five trepidatious years of work that saw them ditch an entire album – was arguably even better: a seven-song cycle touching on futile romances and the need for reassurance, culminating in the emotional release brought by 'Saturday Night'.

The return to their roots that followed the more guitar-based *Peace At Last* (1996) was not without its drama – not least, a reprisal of the pre-*Hats* episode that saw them scrap a whole batch of songs. "It wasn't the most pleasant of decisions," admits Buchanan, "but it just wasn't working. And I would love to pretend that they were hidden treasures, but they weren't. You know, we're just gentlemen amateurs, really. They weren't up to scratch, and that's it."



(Left to Right) Robert Bell, Paul Buchanan, Flossy, Paul Joseph Moore

### LITTLE ECHOES

Given *High*'s problematic gestation, then, listeners should not be surprised by the "assertive" moments that crop up throughout the album – nor the references to their earlier work, heard most prominently on the *Rooftops*-echoing 'Days Of Our Lives'.

"That was how it emerged, but it was pleasing in that it's got something of the resilience of the first record about it," admits Buchanan. "We were all keen on the song, and the fact that it referred aurally to *A Walk Across the Rooftops* just gave it a tidy stamp of approval in our very finite world."

More noticeable still is the increased confidence of Buchanan's vocals, which defy gravity at several points during the album, not least on 'Broken Love' – a climactic piece in the mould of 'Headlights On the Parade', and resolved with an exultant instrumental coda.

"We had been in a studio all day and there was a power cut, and we were supposed to leave the studio to meet someone for a meal," recalls Buchanan of the song's origination. "We were meant to go at seven or

7.30 and the power came on at, say, five to seven, and I was so frustrated at having wasted the whole day I didn't go to the dinner. I stayed in the studio and the song kind of blurred out."

Less characteristically, 'Because of Toledo' nods towards an older songwriting model, its loose montage of Raymond Carver-esque

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scenes unified by the notion of Toledo as a semi-mythical idyll for all those pictured within.

"I'm delighted that you're saying a semi-mythical place because that's what it was to me. I heard someone saying 'because of Toledo' in a café in America, and then I went home and it just seemed to take its own shape."

### ON MESSAGE, OFF MESSAGE

Exquisite and emotionally resonant, *High* will not be an easy sell for new label Sanctuary in an era when the prevalent assumption seems to be that the listener's attention span for new music is only marginally longer than the

latest advert for The Gap. All too aware that it's tricky to describe the qualities The Blue Nile continue to search for without sounding overly precious, Buchanan is adamant that the desire for more involving culture – be it music, movies or books – remains strong: "It just feels otherwise because [the same messages] are pushed in your face every time you switch on

your computer or sit on a bus and look at the adverts. The same things get shoved at you all the time – there's a club and you're not in it. 'Are you embarrassed by your ringtone?' I mean, what??"

In their own gentle, diffident way, The Blue Nile are there to mark out a different space. "I could never say you have to listen to it differently... but not everything is crashing drums and riffs. I've no patience with the keynote artefacts that crop in music over and over again. You're supposed to have a certain kind of reverb on the drums on a dance record, and so on – it seems to me to be reducing our senses and reducing the experiences that we can have."

"Obviously if I stand up in the pub or whatever and say, What I believe is, I might as well put my head in the noose," laughs Buchanan. "Because it's yeah yeah, whatever, you're pretentious. It smacks of people who, to some extent, are just not interested in the same things as you. Somehow they don't want to concede that that dimension exists to our consciousness – they don't live like that, people don't feel like people in Raymond Carver stories, and it's not about that level of detail and that level of the subconscious. But it is, for a lot of people."

It is The Blue Nile's willingness to seek out this very quality that continues to make their work so special. Buchanan concludes: "We've done it from scratch instinctively in the hope that if we do something that's free of our personalities to some extent, and free of any techniques that we might have in other areas of life, we'll stumble across something more honest and more true."

*High* is fresh validation of this approach. Long may they continue to stumble.

*High* is released by Sanctuary on August 30th – a full review will appear in the next issue of TotalMusic. It is preceded by the single, 'I Would Never', on August 23rd.

