

## THE DIVINE COMEDY – A BIOGRAPHY

**The Divine Comedy is Neil Hannon.**

Over the years, the name has encompassed other musicians, but the driving force of the band and its main (sometimes only!) member has always been Neil Hannon. He chose the name 'The Divine Comedy' aged 18, almost at random. He and two Enniskillen school friends needed a new name for their band and Neil spotted a copy of Dante's epic poem on the family bookshelf. It stuck, and a year later it was the name under which the trio signed to Irish run indie **Setanta Records**. They left Northern Ireland, moved into a squat in London, released a mini-album, 1990's REM/Ride influenced '**Fanfare for the Comic Muse**' and '91's '**Europop**' E.P. then split up. Neil's bandmates went to university and Neil returned home.

Retaining the name, he spent 18 months living in his parents' attic, sleeping during the day, watching old movies and writing songs at night. Influenced by everything from Jacques Brel, Scott Walker and Michael Nyman to "A Room with a View", Wordsworth, and Mr Benn, these songs eventually evolved into two albums. The first of these, '**Liberation**' was released in 1993. Totally different to anything else around, and indeed his previous work, he now considers it his first album proper. The press adored it. The NME described it as "...an array of seductive yarns.. glorious, gleeful tunesmanship." Dave Cavanagh, writing in Select said "...one of the bountiful, overflowing joys of the year. Any year." Melody Maker described it as "An album that could make any listener want to stumble up to him and proclaim 'Neil, you're a genius'". In Volume, Graham Linehan (later co-creator of Father Ted) said "*Liberation was by a mile the best LP of '93 and it probably won't be bettered until the follow-up.*"

Despite the critical acclaim, 'Liberation' only sold a few thousand copies in the UK. Undeterred by this, and encouraged by some early signs of success in France, Neil pressed on. Recorded soon after the release of 'Liberation', his next album, '**Promenade**' was released in the spring of '94. Loosely exploring a day in the life of a pair of friends / siblings / lovers, it was an immediate hit with the critics. The Melody Maker said "*Promenade' is music hall, cool French films, late nights in a bygone city, sea-shanties swelled by alcohol... 'Promenade' walks the path of indulgence with bravado and a mischievous grin. A stolen masterpiece.*" Q picked it as one of its best albums of '94 and described it as "*One of the most unexpected and original treasures of the year.*" Reviewing for Select, Stuart Maconie said "*'Promenade' is a masterpiece. If you do one brave and imaginative thing this month, be on the side of the angels and buy this record.*"

Post 'Promenade', The Divine Comedy were firmly in the ascendant. 'Promenade' had sold 10,000 records, not a huge number but more than could have been imagined a few years before. They had supported Tori Amos on her European tour, received press of the kind that other bands can only dream about, and were even being played late night on Radio 1, thanks to Mark Radcliffe. Plus, Neil was on his way to becoming a bona fide popstar in France. It was time for the follow up, the album that would take The Divine Comedy all the way.

1995 was an introspective year for Neil. 'Liberation' and 'Promenade' had taken three years of hard work. Now he found himself fresh out of songs. He took four months out to write, and then spent eight months recording his next album, '**Casanova**'. During this time, he was asked by journalist Graham Linehan to write the music for a new sit-com he was writing. The show became the hit Channel 4 comedy series '**Father Ted**' and the music Neil provided became its theme tune. Reworked, with lyrics added, it made its way onto the new album as 'Songs of Love'.

If 'Liberation' and 'Promenade' were a young man's romantic dreams, then 'Casanova' was all about what came after those dreams. Neil had now begun to experience success and the lifestyle that went with it. 'Casanova', as its title suggests, was an exploration and dissection of a world of casual affairs, loose morals and a thousand worries in between. From the NME: "*Casanova' fairly teems with sex, with suppressed desires.. with ample evidence of what dicks men can be.*" As before, it was critically acclaimed. Mojo described it as a "*glorious.. sumptuous paen to life, love and longing*". Select said "*Only a barren heart could resist it.. Sensible people simply swooned.*" 'Casanova' was also the album on which Neil finally got to use the instrumentation he had always aspired to. He had already begun to put together a band for touring, this was augmented on the album by strings and brass and, on one track, full orchestra.

As 'Promenade' had done, 'Casanova' sold its 10,000 copies on release early in '96 and that looked like being it. But then Setanta tried something that they'd never had the cashflow to do before. They released a single, the album's opening track, '**Something For the Weekend**'. As luck would have it, Radio One DJ Chris Evans was played the single at a friend's house, and fell in love with it. Next morning he played the song three times on air, extending his show 5 minutes to do so. And then Evans invited Neil onto his TV show, TFI Friday to perform. This was the start of a rollercoaster of TV appearances, press interviews, radio play and at last, real success. 'Something for the Weekend' was a hit, as were its follow up singles, '**Becoming More like Alfie**' and '**The Frog Princess**'. Neil, in his trademark suits and sunglasses, was everywhere, the most unlikely popstar on the block.

By now, The Divine Comedy had already gained a name for themselves as an exciting live act. Neil had put together a collective of musicians, comprising one time 'Young Composer of the Year' Joby Talbot (who had been working with him since 'Promenade') on piano, former schoolmates Bryan Mills and Ivor Talbot on bass and guitar respectively, Stuart "Pinkie" Bates on hammond and Miggy Barradas on drums. However for Neil's next release he wanted to take both the recording and live experience one step further. He had a collection of songs which had been

deemed too romantic for the down and dirty 'Casanova'. He decided to record them as a companion piece to 'Casanova', and to do the whole thing live with a full orchestra. The resulting 7 song album was entitled '**A Short Album about Love**'. Arranged by Joby Talbot, and recorded live at the Shepherds Bush Empire in London, with the band plus the 30 piece Brunel Ensemble, it was released in time for Valentine's Day, 1997. NME described the show where the album was recorded as *"an evening when dreams finally come true; a night of costume changes, classical kisses and - in time honoured tradition of drinking and dressing up - hugely sophisticated fun. Oh, and there's a proper interval too. One suspects it wouldn't be too hazardous to suggest that Neil Hannon is having by far the finest night of his entire sodding life."* Time Out, reviewing the album, said: *"Seven of the most heart-stoppingly gorgeous, romantic smoochers you have ever heard, all drenched in strings and emotion."* There was a single from the album, '**Everybody Knows (Except You)**' and an orchestral tour of the UK and France. The rest of '97 was spent with more touring, including Europe, the US and Japan. The year also saw Neil fulfilling a lifetime ambition, collaborating with composer Michael Nyman for three shows at the Edinburgh Festival.

Neil's next album, released in Autumn '98 was an altogether more sombre affair. Entitled '**Fin de Siecle**' it was recorded in two weeks with the band (now joined by percussionist Rob Farrer) and the Brunel Ensemble, ably assisted by the Crouch End Festival Chorus and the vocal talents of opera singer and Nyman favourite Hillary Summers. Full of millennial angst, 'Fin de Siecle' was Neil's most ambitious album to date. David Peschek in Time Out described it as *"A huge, extraordinary record – a concept album even, picking at the scabs of twentieth century existence.. quintessential pop music."* Danny Eccleston, writing in Metro said *"Fin de Siecle...is dangerously close to being a masterpiece.. funny, sad, melodically compelling and obsessed with the themes of numbness, death and public transport."* Neil McCormick in the Telegraph said *"Neil Hannon is one of the most prodigiously talented individuals working in the world of pop... The range of Hannon's songwriting is simply unmatched by any of his contemporaries"*. The album charted at number 9 – the band's best yet. But it was the third single from the album, '**National Express**' that caught people's imagination. Earlier singles '**Generation Sex**' and '**The Certainty Of Chance**' did well with the fanbase but '**National Express**' was a magnificent pop moment that far exceeded the band's usual reach and it provided The Divine Comedy with their first top ten single and biggest hit to date.

1999 marked both ten years of The Divine Comedy and the end of their tenure with Setanta Records. To mark the occasion, Setanta released a 'best of' compilation. '**A Secret History**' featured highlights from the five albums to date and charted at number 3. Other projects in 1999 included a contribution to Tom Jones' '**Reload**' album and a collaboration with diva Ute Lemper on her '**Punishing Kiss**' album.

The Divine Comedy released their first album for new label Parlophone Records in March 2001. Recorded with producer Nigel Godrich (Radiohead / Travis / Beck) '**Regeneration**' had a much greater emphasis on the six members of the band. No orchestra or choir here, 'Regeneration' was about going back to the basics – ie, the songs. The Observer said: *"Regeneration marks, for Hannon, a personal and musical breakthrough"*. Laura Lee Davies in Time Out said: *"Hannon has finally created an album as complete and deftly wondrous as you suspected he was capable of; every track shines with a love for music and a growing ability to articulate."* The Times said *"A subtle collection of gorgeous pop songs. Combining the lyrical dexterity of old with some spectacular melodies, this is an album that lives up to the promise of its title"*. '**Regeneration**' featured three singles '**Love What You Do**', '**Bad Ambassador**' and '**Perfect Lovesong**'. Sadly this was the last album to be recorded with the line-up formed for Casanova in 1996.

Early in 2002 Neil undertook an extensive series of dates supporting Ben Folds in the US. This coincided with the Nettwerk Records US release of '**Regeneration**' – the first full release for The Divine Comedy in the states. Both the release and the dates were well received, leading to follow up headline tours late in 2002 and early in 2003.

The Divine Comedy's next album, '**Absent Friends**' was produced and largely performed by Neil himself. It was released on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2004, preceded the week before by the single '**Come Home Billy Bird**'. Long-standing collaborator Joby Talbot orchestrated the album, which was recorded by Guy Massey and mixed by Nigel Godrich. The album also features guest appearances by Xfm DJ Lauren Laverne and French multi-instrumentalist Yann Tiersen. The album spans a time during which Neil experienced the disbanding of the old Divine Comedy line-up, the birth of his first child, extensive US touring and moving from London to Dublin. These events affected both album title and content and on the subject Neil says: *"Most of the songs use stories and characters as a framework for the loose theme of coming, going and not being quite sure where you want to be"*. *"The whole album is rich, beautiful and can make you smile and cry on the turn of a chorus"* stated Phil Jupitus in the Radio Times, while the Guardian described it as an *"ornate gem"* and Word magazine announced *"it's Neil Hannon's best yet"*. "

To bring the luscious orchestral sounds of the album to live audiences, Neil embarked on a special 5-date tour accompanied by a 15-piece ensemble in the spring. A second single, title track opener '**Absent Friends**' was released on June 14<sup>th</sup> and on October 25<sup>th</sup> the band's first ever DVD was released. Recorded live at the London Palladium earlier in the year, the success of the live shows was also celebrated with the accompanying issue of a special download-only live '**Bavarian EP**' via the band's website. The year's punishing album campaign schedule culminated in the sold out orchestral concerts at Les Folies Bergere in Paris and the Royal Albert Hall in London in early November. Neil then went home to Dublin for a much-needed break with his family, returning to London briefly to take part in the prestigious Band Aid 20 project.

2005 marked a year of exploration for Neil. He put The Divine Comedy on a back-burner and turned his attention to long-standing interests to which he'd never previously been able to dedicate concentrated time. He

wrote extensively, both with and for other artists. These included songs for Jane Birkin and her daughter Charlotte Gainsbourg, the latter a collaborative work with French band Air, Jarvis Cocker and produced by Nigel Godrich. He also collaborated with Guy Chambers on songs for West End star Laura Michelle Kelly's debut pop album. New compositions were created for potential film score use and ideas for musical theatre were put into development. Amongst all this activity Neil also briefly embarked on a covers album project which he has now shelved, though a couple of the standout tracks will no doubt be released at some point.

Amazingly, Neil also found himself writing lots of new songs for The Divine Comedy. The resulting 30 or so songs were whittled down to a more manageable sum and **'Victory For The Comic Muse'**, the new album emerged, so Neil says, more or less by accident. The album was recorded virtually live in the studio over a period of two weeks in late 2005. Modern recording techniques were set aside in favour of analogue tape and as few microphones as possible. This old school technique enabled Neil to capture the warmth of live performances and the freshness that can only come from doing something in just one or two takes. Less overtly personal, **'Victory...'** is a wonderful collection of stories and observations, set within a wide range of musical styles. It was released on 19<sup>th</sup> June. Phill Jupitus calls it "*effortlessly timeless pop music*" and Word says it is "*even wittier and more sophisticated than Divine Comedy records usually are*".

The first single to be taken from **'Victory...'** was **'Diva Lady'**, released on June 12<sup>th</sup> and was followed a rousing sold out show at London's prestigious Somerset House on July 6<sup>th</sup>. A second single **'To Die A Virgin'** was released in August and, after a run of summer festival appearances, the Divine Comedy completed their most extensive stretch of touring taking in the UK, France, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland and Ireland. The third single to be taken from **'Victory...'** was a track adored by fans, media and the public at large: **'A Lady Of A Certain Age'**. It appeared as an exclusive limited edition in November.

Alongside the release of the album, Neil also found time to contribute to a number of charity records and provided vocals for the 'Dr Who' TV series official soundtrack. He was presented with the prestigious James Joyce Award by the Literary and Historical Society, University College Dublin for his outstanding contribution to modern music. Finally, as a fitting round-up of recent achievements, in February 2007 Neil won the prestigious Choice Music Prize (the Irish equivalent of the Mercury Music Prize) for **'Victory For The Comic Muse'**.

It would be fair to assume that after all the activity of 2006 Neil would be taking a break. But he is instead busy on a number of other projects outside The Divine Comedy. There are a variety of screen productions in discussion and Neil is contributing music to a new series of Channel 4 sitcom 'The IT Crowd', penned by his old friend and 'Father Ted' creator Graham Linehan. In addition he is involved with a musical theatre project in conjunction with the National Theatre. Neil is also continuing his successful forays into writing with and for other artists. He appears on Air's new album **'Pocket Symphony'** providing vocals to the track 'Somewhere Between Waking And Sleeping', which he co-wrote. The album has recently topped the French charts.