



2010 biography

by Barry Walsh

Thomas D'Arcy is a young man without a past... well, he'd prefer to be thought of that way, at least.

Truth is that the Toronto-based musician does have a past, one worth touching upon for a minute or two. For our purposes, it begins with The Carnations, his guitar-oriented, much-buzzed-about band from the 1990s, and his re-emergence from a self-imposed musical exile after that band's implosion as The Ladies & Gentlemen. Under that moniker, D'Arcy sealed himself into a basement studio and crafted intelligent, impossibly melodic pop, trading in the indie rock framework of his earlier bands for disarmingly engaging tunes swaddled in bits of burbling synth, propulsive rhythms and layers upon layers of sweet vocal harmonies. What was a therapeutic solo project for D'Arcy became a live touring band once the recordings made their way into the wider world in 2005, and that touring band became Small Sins. The solo record, in turn, became Small Sins' first album for Astralwerks, who signed D'Arcy and the band shortly after the album made waves via Canadian label Boomp! and who also released the slightly more muscular but every bit as entrancing follow-up album, *Mood Swings*, in 2007.

There... the two minutes for the past are up, and now we can get on with what D'Arcy is more concerned with (and for good reason) – the present day, and *Pot Calls Kettle Black*, the new album from Small Sins. It's not that D'Arcy isn't happy with his previous work; truth be told, he's reticent to talk about the band's recordings, period. "I wish that I could just put out records and not have to talk to another person about it," he sighs. But when it comes to *Pot Calls Kettle Black*, even he admits that there's much to discuss.

Coming a few years after *Mood Swings*, *Pot Calls Kettle Black* emerged from a period not dissimilar to D'Arcy's post-Carnations blues, when the young singer-songwriter considered hanging it all up at the ripe old age of 24. This time, D'Arcy was coming to terms with the fact that the method he previously employed to create – a work ethic that saw him write a song a day during his most prolific periods – wasn't working anymore. An entire album was written and recorded, and subsequently scrapped – a collection of songs that D'Arcy says hail from his "dark ages" (but fear not, he still plans to release them as bonus material). The struggle to be truly engaged in creating new material threw the difference between honing a craft and genuine inspiration into sharp relief for D'Arcy.

"Sometimes it becomes too much of a math equation," he says of the writing process. "It's the difference between turning on a tap and digging a well."

Thankfully, the tap started flowing again when a new song emerged out of nowhere ("The best things I've written are the songs that came as soon as I picked up the guitar," he admits). Indeed, the flow became close to torrential – four or five songs that made it onto *Pot Calls Kettle Black* emerged during a particularly fruitful week in October, 2009.

At that point, D'Arcy knew he had the makings of an album, but that immediate action would need to be taken. He also knew that just as the old writing process had to be given a swift kick in the ass, so too did the recording process. For the first album, D'Arcy recorded the bulk of the material himself in the basement, calling in friends such as classically-trained pianist Todor Kobakov and former Carnation comrade and guitarist Steve Krecklo in for cameos. Once Ladies & Gentlemen evolved into a full-fledged touring band as Small Sins, featuring drummer/percussionist Brent Follett and keyboardist/handclapper Kevin Hilliard in addition to Krecklo, Kobakov and D'Arcy, the recording process evolved somewhat. Still, even with *Mood Swings*, individual members would add parts to songs but would rarely work as a unit. "We'd played so many shows together, yet I'd always shut them out of this one thing [recording]," he says. "So I asked myself, 'Why not do it as a team? Why do I have to be such a dick about it?'"

As he decided to give his bandmates more responsibility in the studio, he also imposed tougher rules on himself, beginning with a ban on over-thinking arrangements. "A lot of times I'd do whole other versions of songs and then say,



'Fuck it, the first version was better,'" he admits. He established a time limit – a month – to record and mix. Each musician's part was worked out well in advance of recording, and in order to capture the performances as efficiently as possible, D'Arcy turned to "the best engineer ever, for me at least" – Chicago-based studio maven John McEntire (Tortoise, Stereolab, The Sea and Cake, and the latest released from Broken Social Scene). Moving the band to McEntire's Soma Electronic Music Studios in Chicago, D'Arcy stuck to his guns. "I wanted to make this record differently and do things I hadn't done before," he recalls. "I decided I was going to make this happen in one month, and for better or for worse, it would be done."

A listen or two to the final result proves it was for the better. With the band members adding their particular strengths to the proceedings, D'Arcy's unerring pop sense is married to a – dare we say it – soulfulness that was missing from earlier efforts. From the first strains of the title track, where Kobakov's string arrangement collides with Follett's booming, distorted drums, it's apparent that D'Arcy's newfound confidence as a songwriter pushed him into new territory sonically, and that the band was indeed, as D'Arcy puts it, "in Type A mode for 10 hours every day." At turns sultry ("Where There's Gold," "Tonight"), slinky (the electro-funk of "Déjà Vu", featuring guest rapper, k-os; the staccato stomp of "Till I Go Home") and haunting (the hushed, contemplative "Everything You Need" and "You Will Lie," which both feature John Obercian on brushed drums), *Pot Calls Kettle Black* marries the intimacy of the first album with the experimentation of *Mood Swings*, but emerges as a document of a band that's truly found its voice.

Lyricaly, D'Arcy is again wary of giving too much away. But he will fess up to this: "I know that this batch of songs contains personal things that I wanted to write about. They all mean something to me." Fair enough. Given the circumstances surrounding the creation of the album, little hints can be deciphered about the songwriter's state of mind: the chorus of "Pot Calls Kettle Black" features the telling couplet, "Maybe in time you'll find your inspiration/If it comes, save some for me." But as D'Arcy maintains, pop music is meant to be different things to different people, so let's not spend too much time on lyrical analysis.

Instead, let's be thankful that D'Arcy somehow found the secret to turning on the tap, and that the band turned the outpour into the 10 tracks on *Pot Calls Kettle Black*. D'Arcy rightfully calls it the best work he's done, and while it came with some false starts and fretful thoughts, it also brought both him and the band to a new level of understanding about each other, and the way *Small Sins* makes music.

"We were driving home," says D'Arcy, recounting one final anecdote about making the album. "And before Todor left he said, 'This record's really good right now. Don't fuck it up.'"

For a man without a past, at least Thomas D'Arcy knows good advice when he hears it.

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