



# ANGEL AND THE BADMAN

THE CURIOUS CASE OF ISOBEL CAMPBELL AND MARK LANEGAN

by: Gregg LaGambina | photography: Autumn DeWilde

It's where angels alight on one side to whisper the truth and devils claw their way up on the other to breathe temptation. That slope down from the neck met by the collarbone creating a shallow pool where light and dark and the whole history of our burdens are played out on thick tendons—these shoulders of ours—where even Atlas had to bend down to one knee under the weight of it all.

In the case of Isobel Campbell and Mark Lanegan, we don't quite bear witness to the mythical contest between good and evil because by most accounts, these two are both "good," with no skulls beneath the floorboards or blood rituals to report. Yet if we're all merely actors on a stage, it's not hard to see how the collaboration between these two represent, in some small way, the opposing forces that hold the entire fabric of our spiritual universe together. Not as big of a stretch as you might think. On *Ballad of the Broken Seas*, it's as if these two found themselves adrift in the belly of a ship out on some uncharted choppy gulf, alone together, without any other option but to combine their voices and sing their vessel to shore. Left and right, two oars cutting through the water where one would just spin them in circles.

On the one side, we have Isobel Campbell, blonde hair, voice like melting lace, former member of Belle & Sebastian, female, comforting like a lullaby, smiles and laughter, something like the sunshine portion of a green afternoon. Directly across from her we have Mark Lanegan, dyed black hair, voice like a burning maple tree, solo artist and sometime member of Queens of the Stone Age, male, quiet like a lullaby, grimace and sarcasm, something like that empty space between the snap of lightning and the rebuttal of thunder.

The two met briefly when QOTSA came through her hometown, and had one of those offhanded conversations of mutual appreciation and the promise of collaboration. "I like your stuff." "I like your stuff too." "We should work together." "That'd be great." Only here there was actual follow-through, and the sea was indeed broken when the two sent each other recordings over the Atlantic—Isobel, a song written for Mark shipped west from Glasgow; Mark, in Los Angeles, laying vocals along with her music and sent back east.

On the one hand, there's a song like "Revolver," penned by Mark with harmonies by Isobel, that arrives like vintage Lanegan (a shadowy lament about firearms over a slow guitar) but reveals a new kind of redemption with the presence of Campbell—her voice like literal air let into a sealed cavern. Or the almost child-like "(Do You Wanna) Come Walk With Me?" with Campbell's flirtatious lilt encouraging the ogre in Lanegan to be more playful than maybe he ought to be. But nothing really surprises like the swinging, almost Bacharach-like "Honey Child What Can I Do?" which features Lanegan's basso skipping beneath Campbell's alto, with a chorus sung like he's pulled the microphone from the stand and is knocking into tables filled with starlets chewing cherry stems. It's all like nothing you've ever heard from either one of them and obviously nothing they'd ever do on their own. What a combo, this mismatched pair of very different misfits uniting in their own kind of clumsy triumph.

Keeping everything we've said so far in mind, here we're going to ask you to stand up straight, keep your face forward, shoulders even, stay still and listen to the testimony of these two. Don't shrug or you'll knock them off and don't judge until you've heard them both. It took two to make *Ballad of the Broken Seas* and it'll take two to tell the story. Lanegan's whisper from the devil side will charm you with sarcastic dismissals and a couple of lies; on the other side, Campbell will fill in the blanks with the charms of effortless truth.

## PART ONE:

### The (Brief, Sarcastic) Gospel of Mark Lanegan

**Was there any sense that your two very different voices would be hard to make compatible, or did this album feel like a natural thing to do?**

It felt natural, man.

**Isobel wrote many of these songs with you in mind. What do you think that means?**

That's the first time I've heard that, actually. So, I'll have to give it some thought [chuckles].

**Any guess at what someone might think "a Mark Lanegan song" sounds like? Is there an idea in your mind as to what that is, or do you think people just project these things onto you?**

Wow. [Laughs] I wouldn't know, man.

**There's this song on *Ballad of the Broken Seas* called "Honey Child What Can I Do?" that has this vintage loungey, almost Burt Bacharach feel to it and I've never heard you really sing on a song like that before.**

Yeah, that's what drew me to it—as well as the darkness to some of the other tunes—but those kinder, gentler tunes were a bit of a stretch for me. Initially it was a little uncomfortable, but I tried to get into the spirit of the thing. I enjoyed it.

**Were you a Belle & Sebastian fan before this?**  
Yeah, I was.

**Are you and Isobel actually friends now, or are you still doing this distant passing of ships in the night who just happen to have made a record together, mostly through the mail, kind of thing?**

No, we've spent some time together socially. And I consider us friends.

**Do you like collaborating, or do you prefer to be on your own?**

No, I prefer the collaborations because, you know, everybody brings something different to the table and that's what makes it exciting for me. And having other people bring these things to life always shows me something new in it.

**Were the covers on this record ("Ramblin' Man" by Hank Williams; the traditional blues song "St. James Infirmary") her choice or yours?**

Those were her choices.

**Are there any sacred songs that you don't even want to touch, or would you be willing to try and sing pretty much anything?**

I'd try anything.

**How much do you care about the "craft" of singing? I can't picture you getting up in the morning like Celine Dion and drinking a special tea and starting off the day with some Chinese scale to keep your voice...**

[Starts chuckling]

**I'm not suggesting that it's an afterthought, but do you obsess over harmonies and singing and tone and performance and things like that?**

No, I smoke cigarettes and drink coffee.

**There's something about your songs that suggest to me that you might like to watch a good documentary about bread making, or welding a church bell. Are you interested in history?**

[Long, low laughter] Yeah, I like the History Channel. I like the Discovery Channel.

**Any particular time or era that you'd rather be in.**

No, I'm happy to be here.

**Do you get sick of people asking why your music is so gloomy?**

No, I don't get sick of it.

**I imagine it's not depressing to you; that your songs are better to sing than to live through. Assuming you haven't lived through all of the songs that you sing...**

[Long pause] No comment.

**I found this gallery of drawings that these fans of yours have done of you and posted on a website. Have you seen them?**

No, I haven't.

**This one particular site has about a dozen drawings. Some are better than others...**

[Much laughter] Wow.

**When I was about 10, I tried to draw Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull. Have you ever drawn a singer you admire?**

No, I can't say that I have.

**I know you're a big Johnny Cash fan, so, uh, any interest in seeing that flick *Walk the Line*?**

That's interesting because I just saw a commercial for it and I thought, "Yeah, I would watch that."

**If they were to make a movie about Mark Lanegan, who would you want them to cast as you?**

Forrest Whitaker.



THEY JUST THINK HE'S A BIG OGRE  
AND THAT I'M A LITTLE WIMP.

— ISOBEL CAMPBELL —

I'M HAPPY TO BE HERE.

— MARK LANEGAN —

# PART TWO:

## The (Bright, Truthful) Gospel of Isobel Campbell

### Was leaving Belle & Sebastian difficult?

It just wasn't for me anymore. I didn't want to sing songs about school when I was like 30, 'cause that would've been slightly disturbing to me. I've gotten happier and happier. It was a good gig to have. It was interesting. I got to go to some great places and do some great things, but I knew when I left that it just wasn't for me anymore. There's no point in staying in something that you're not into and then bring everyone else down with you.

### As far as the way people perceive you and the music you make, do ever grow tired of words like "twee"?

I think I used to, but now I just have a big belly laugh. I don't really care.

### What does "twee" even mean?

I don't think "twee" is a compliment. I don't think someone says, "Oh, that's great and twee." I think it's always a putdown, isn't it? I think of it as being pretty lame, like it's someone that skips around and dresses like a cat, or someone who sucks her thumb. Maybe a bit sickly sweet as well. I always think of someone batting their eyelashes and skipping rope. But I'd rather have a reputation for being a goodie-goodie because then I can do whatever I want and nobody knows. If I had a reputation for being really badass, it would just follow me around.

### What does it mean to sit down and write a song for Mark Lanegan?

It's really easy. I always wanted to write for someone with a low voice. I've always loved Lee Hazelwood and Robert Mitchum, things like that. Once I've heard someone sing, there's melodies I might write and then I can sort of hear that person singing it. You just sort of let a person's voice get under your skin. It's kind of a weird thing to do, but it's fun, especially when it works. Most of the time it does, and it's something that I'm really, really, really into. I would write songs for other people all the time. I like my voice, but different voices have their own limitations, so it's great to write for the whole spectrum of crazy voices.

### There's been some talk about how diametrically opposed your two voices are...

They just think he's like a big ogre and that I'm a little wimp. And that's really how it is [laughs].

### Is it like you're both so accustomed to your own voices, you secretly wish you could sing like the other person?

His voice is so amazing. It's such a classic American voice. He's always really down on his voice and I'm always really down on my voice. In that way, we're a pretty good team. I wish my voice had more bite. I would always love to come back with a great soul voice, in another life. We're a good team in a sense that we're both very critical of ourselves. I don't really know why. I think we're both our own people. It's weird, because we made quite a personal record, but in different cities. But maybe it's easier to do it that sort of way. I don't know him too well. But he's always been really sweet to me, and a real gentleman. He's always laughed at my jokes too, which I think is pretty good.

### I was asking Mark about "Honey Child What Can I Do?" and how he felt singing something that, for him, seems so upbeat. Did you have to convince him to sing that one, or did he just dive in?

He dove in! That's one of his favorites. He loves that one. I started that song when I was like 19, with a friend about 10 years ago. Then I was writing all these new songs, I was just hanging around my house last January, just raking around and staying up all night—I don't really know what I was up to, but I was just rummaging around and the music just fell out and I was like, "Oh, maybe I can finish that one for this record." I'll probably have lots of Goths on my back or something, trying to bump me off for that song [laughs].

### How'd you decide on the covers for this album?

I didn't pick them, they kinda just picked us. He chose "St. James Infirmary"...

### I'm beginning to think Mr. Lanegan might be a liar.

Is he?! Did he say I picked that one?

### He said that you picked the covers. I could've sworn he'd be the one who would've picked "Ramblin' Man."

[Laughs] That one was me.

### Do you have anyone else in mind that you'd like to bump into and make a record through the mail with?

There are voices that I really love. Mark's got such a unique voice. If I were a man, that would be how I'd want to sing. I've always had this fantasy of being one of the women to sing with Leonard Cohen, or something. How great is he? I think I would just die and go to heaven. I love those records. But that will obviously never happen, so... Tom Waits is amazing.

### You seem to like a nice brooding baritone. You don't like any...

Wimps? I like *some* wimps [laughs].

### It really isn't such a strange combo after all, because both you and Mark have an affinity for melancholy music and your voices both complement that mood on this album.

I think you put that the right way. Maybe I didn't realize it, but I think that's true. We've both got our own kind of melancholic streak. We're also both really huge music fans. I don't think we're totally downbeat, but sometimes happy music is more alienating—really manic happy music.

### You can find comfort in it because you can relate to it, or you can be empathetic...

Right. It's not because I'm an old misery guts, but it's manically happy it can actually be more sinister.

### Medicated happiness.

Yeah, like the Smurfs or the Chipmunks. What is that? It makes me just want to burst into tears. I feel a lot more peaceful listening to something darker. **F**

## TWO'S COMPANY

### Isobel Campbell's Favorite Duets

**"Gentle On Mind" or "Little Green Apples"**  
Bobbie Gentry and Glen Campbell  
From *Bobbie Gentry & Glen Campbell* (1968)  
Definitely these two; they're both so great.

**"Some Velvet Morning"**  
Nancy Sinatra and Lee Hazelwood  
From *Nancy & Lee* (1968)

It's just so psychedelic and trippy. I was listening to *A Cowboy in Sweden* by Lee Hazelwood the other night. That's a great album.

**"Je T'Aime...Moi Non Plus"**  
Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin  
From *Jane Birkin et Serge Gainsbourg* (2001; reissue. Originally recorded in 1969)  
I would like to maybe have a child to that record. I think a lot of people did. That's not surprising. I love a lot of the duets Serge Gainsbourg did. I really like *Comic Strip*.