



Life Grows Where Rosemary Goes (In Memory Of Tim Underwood, RIP)

bobgordonplusone in Music · © June 28, 2020 · 1,924 Words

Pic: Tim Underwood and Gretta Little, Courtyard Club, December, 2016. cr Damien Crocker

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It took The Rosemary Beads 24 years to release their debut album, *Shine*. The journey within has often been dark, but the future looks bright indeed.

Driving through Northbridge along Roe St, on the way to see The Rosemary Beads, the lulling yet gritty tones of Swervediver's *Rave Down* on the radio provide a fitting soundtrack amidst the traffic, not to mention one's pre-gig mindset.

Both bands have been favourites on Perth community radio station, RTRFM, for some time now.

Two decades in fact; for this isn't April, 1994, but December, 2016, and '90s specialist program *Siamese Dream* has taken over the Friday *Drivetime* airwaves for a live broadcast of The Rosemary Beads' Courtyard Club appearance at the State Theatre Centre.

Time sure flies, except when it doesn't (and let's be frank, it hasn't). Yet here we are, out of the carpark and into the warmth of gentle evening sunlight in the Courtyard, with kids playing all over the shop, watched over by strangely familiar-looking-middle-aged parents. They look like people who may have been at The Rosemary Beads' second EP launch at the Grosvenor Hotel on that Saturday of April of '94, shaking their heads at the day's headline news that Kurt Cobain had taken his own life. Oh yeah... they were.

But these here are gentler times. Not that the world is kinder by any stretch of the imagination, but the people gathered – including the band – are tempered by two decades of real life and new life to boot. This is the real life.

Between 1992-95 The Rosemary Beads were perhaps a little too tension-driven to be the darlings of the Perth music scene, but they made a damn good fist of being its prodigal sweethearts. There were several incarnations, but the celebrated/classic line-up of Gretta Little (*vocals/bass*), Tim Underwood (*vocals/guitar*) and drummer Cam Munachen motored through three excellent Citadel Records-released EPs in those years (*Dog, Breath, I'll Come When I'm Good And Ready*). Little and Underwood had been in bands together for almost a decade by this point and for most of the band's tenure they were a couple. Until they weren't.

Little eventually left the band. During 1995 a four-piece line-up briefly trod the boards until Munachen tragically died of an overdose in the spring of that year. He was a good, young man whose demise betrayed his true character and whose loss spelt the end of The Rosemary Beads. Underwood lost his best friend and his band in one cruel swoop. Munachen's funeral saw a grief-stricken Perth/Fremantle band scene turn up in droves and as his coffin was wheeled out of the chapel it was to the (loud) strains of the Rosemary Beads' last single, *Worried About F*cking*. Rock and pop tension to the last.

It really was agonising for all those anywhere near it. The end of The Rosemary Beads wasn't just a band break-up. People were broken.



Rosemary Beads circa 1994, Cam Munachen, Gretta Little, Tim Underwood

Which makes their reformation, in early 2015, something of a fairytale ending... no, make that a beginning. With different lives, partners, paths and children occupying the two decades in between, Little and Underwood connected again via what brought them together in the first place.

It was music.

Doves cried.

Joined by drummer, Warren Hall (*The Drones, The Volcanics, The M-16s*), a one-off gig was arranged at the Astor Lounge in February, 2015. Their three EPs were conjoined into a single CD edition and a video tribute to Munachen was played before their performance.

It clicked.

The only thing that could happen next was more of it.

"It just kind of happened," says Little. "At first, we were just gonna do the one gig, then after we'd been jamming together for a little while I think everyone started to go, 'this is fun'. On the day of our reformation gig I said to Tim, 'I want to keep doing it if it keeps working out like this'."

"Gretta and I rediscovered our love for playing music with one another," Underwood adds. "We're in tune with each other's songs... and it just sort of snowballed, I guess. A rehearsal turned into another one, which turned into a gig, then another gig. It was all pretty organic."

It's a special, unprecedented reconciliation and as such is being treated with due care. Appearances at marquee events such as the *Nannup Music Festival* and RTRFM's iconic *In The Pines* have been complemented by selected venue shows. After this many years, no one's in a hurry to wear this out. The beating heart in all this is unveiled as the band's debut album, 24 years after they formed.

Released in November 2016, *Shine* features unrecorded gems from the past and independently-written tunes borne since. It sounds like what might have followed back in the day, but doesn't echo as a mere time capsule. It truly sounds like an essence of then and now, for today... and tomorrow. Because the band's very existence now, proves that despite the evidence, tomorrow is always a possibility.

"I'm glad you think that," Little responds. "We don't sit back and go, 'let's make this the next Beads sound' or anything but it just turned out that way. We sound like The Rosemary Beads but... further along. I did listen to an old recording the other day and I do think that I sing a little differently. I didn't think that I did, but I do. And I play bass a little differently, too."

"You can't plan that kind of thing," Underwood says. "Even when we were choosing the songs that we were going to do again, the same ones kept popping up. For instance, *General Franco* (from 1993's *Dog EP*), which we still play, that song is 24 years-old, and it's such fun to play and always gets such a good response. It's turned out to be kind of timeless in a way that, for example, *She Ain't Around* hasn't remained timeless (*laughs*).

"You can't plan it; the songs are either there, or they're not. I always thought we had a great album in us; and I really like this album, but I think the next one will be killer."

A new album looks a probability in 2017, but in regards to *Shine*, songs of yore that were resurrected include *She Said I'm Dead, Crack It Wide Open and Torture & Jealousy*. Little had a brand-new tune, *Comet*, and some older songs that hadn't been done with the Beads – *Stars, Denial and The Driving Song*, the latter about her old border collie, Blossom, a fixture at the band's gigs back in the day.

Other memories aren't so happy. It's a complicated history.

"I wrote a song called *Stars*," Little says. "I had a rather unfortunate run in my 20s. People obviously know that Cam died and Tim went off on a different journey, and unfortunately, for me, there were numerous people in my life having numerous troubles. *Stars* is kind of about that period of time where lots of really sad things happened in a really short space of time. And that often makes me think about those days as well, which weren't happy for me, unfortunately, through no fault of my own, but you can't really do anything about that."

"Those songs are a part of my life whether I wrote them or not. They hold time. I remember things like certain gigs when we play, but mostly I just remember what was happening in my life. I don't know if other people do that."

Underwood's brand-new song is *Ain't Nobody Else Like Me*, and it's the newer stuff he is enjoying playing the most.

"We were always pretty lyrically dark," he says, "but now I think 20 years later that the lyrics are even darker. We've got 20 years under our belts of things we've been through and experienced and all that kind of stuff that the lyrics are even darker than they used to be. That's the main difference. That's not about the group dynamically, but the lyrics are definitely getting darker."

Both Little and Underwood speak highly of Hall, the Beads' new drummer.

"Probably one of the best things about being in a band is fiddling around with a new song and working out what to do with it," Little says. "We all like that and all sit well with each other creatively. In a band, you need, personality-wise, and people who are all going to go okay together and he's both of those things, as well as being a really good drummer. I'm glad he's happy working together with us."

"Waz is quite comfortable stopping a song and suggesting something that could go in at that part," Underwood explains. "Which is quite interesting, because he's doesn't play an instrument, so he'll say something like, 'I think we should have a guitar twiddle there', or 'I think the bass should run down there' so Gretta and I will take that input. He's really committed to the structure of a song."

Since the album was finished, Cam Sim (*Worm Farm*) has come on board as the band's second guitarist, to bring those extra recorded flourishes to the stage.

"That's interesting because Cam and Waz devised that idea between themselves at the start," Underwood recalls. "And they had to sell it to me. I was apprehensive at first, because I quite like being the guitarist in The Rosemary Beads. Another guitarist? Another guitarist? But when Cam walked into the room and set up, it wasn't even an audition. He just slotted in really well, so it was great."

"It's going to evolve the sound a bit more and give us a few more options going forward," Little adds. "It's good to have someone else in the band to mix things up a bit."

The Courtyard Club gig goes off with a few hitches (the PA cuts out twice, but everyone is ever-so-calm about it all), yet the band itself are truly sublime. Memories come flooding back, but it's very much about how it works in the present. And with kids running around everywhere during the show, it's a touching reminder that there is a future to behold for this band.

"It's pretty exciting and I just find it really good fun," Little smiles. "I was at home with twins for four years. You go out and play a gig and people clap you. Nobody claps you at home!"

"It's not surreal anymore," Underwood concludes. "It's one of the most interesting band histories I can think of, where you break up and 20 years later you get back together and start playing again. Basically, the new songs are great; and the rehearsals are great; and the jams are great; and the songwriting's great."

"Gretta's still got a set of pipes on her and she's still playing interesting basslines. It's great. We're not getting the crowds that we did in the '90s, but I don't think anyone is. We're just having fun and enjoying it."

Tim Underwood passed away on June 27, 2020. RIP.

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2 thoughts on "Life Grows Where Rosemary Goes (In Memory Of Tim Underwood, RIP)"

Daniel Renton
January 15, 2021 at 10:26 am

Thanks for the thoughtful and emotional article. I was just listening to the Breath EP for the first time in...a long time, recalling (if that's the correct word) nights on the sticky carpet in the smoky band room at The Shents and jumped down the internet rabbit hole, asking "what are the Beads' members doing now and does the internet care?" Sad to learn that Tim joined Cam at the epic after after party last crazy year, happy it seems Gretta is still around and making awesome music no doubt, even if only in the mind. Let's all enjoy it while we're here.

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bobgordonplusone
January 15, 2021 at 3:43 am

Hi Daniel, apologies, I've only just seen your comment. Very sad about Tim. Gretta now has a band called Little Things.

<https://www.facebook.com/Littlethings.perth>

Cheers,
Bob

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