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Whitehorse-Power Couple: Luke Doucet, Melissa McClelland Will Steal Your Heart

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Luke Doucet and Melissa McClelland weren't even born when Marvin Gaye and Kim Weston teamed up for the Motown hit single "It Takes Two" in 1965. Two years later, they also missed out when Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty costarred in *Bonnie and Clyde*, the Academy Award-nominated film about a romantic but violent couple who became legendary for robbing banks throughout America's heartland.

Doucet and McClelland aren't soul singers, actors or criminals. Hell, they don't even live in the United States. But they are a cute Canadian married couple of thirty-something singer-songwriters who combined forces -- and voices -- in 2011, taking the best qualities of some of those American pop culture icons to form an adventurous band called Whitehorse.

The daring duo named the group after the remote town in the northwest Canadian territory of Yukon -- not the galloping animal, McClelland points out. This Whitehorse really likes to to be on the run, though, and will release their remarkable second album, *The Fate of the World Depends on This Kiss*, on Tuesday (January 15) in the United States, almost five months after its Canadian release.

"It's not always as easy for us to figure out the best way to do things in America, so sometimes it just takes a bit longer to get it ready," Doucet said last week in explaining the time gap. "And I think it also gave us a chance to go out on the road and play a lot and get this show on its feet so that when we finally do the proper American tour, we can show up with all our guns blazing."

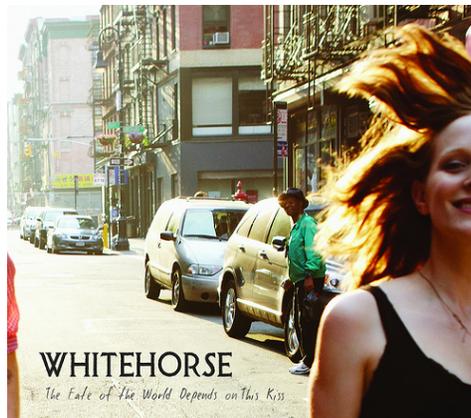
During a phone interview from Toronto, where they were busy rehearsing for their upcoming tour in support of the album, Doucet and McClelland (below) were charming, funny, frank and incredibly insightful. The subjects ranged from their working relationship with Sarah McLachlan, the end of the National Hockey League lockout, his like for playing -- but not watching -- Canada's national pastime and her feelings about Whitehorse's nomadic Bonnie-and-Clyde existence from a fearless, passionate

perspective as they roam the countryside together trying to win over the folks in every town they play.

The two-is-better-than-one approach to their profession took longer for the artists -- who've had varying degrees of success after making 10 solo records between them -- to accomplish than it did to get hitched. The marriage in 2006 was inevitable, Doucet said, when they realized, "We're obviously going to spend our lives together, so let's have a party."

While they worked on each other's projects as far back as 2004, falling in love shortly afterward, they also were touring members of McLachlan's band (including Lilith in 2010 and the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in 2011, where they hope to eventually return as a duo).

It took several years before they did the math: $1 + 1 =$ a love match made in music heaven.



"We were always really, really deeply involved in each other's work right from the start," said McClelland, who met Doucet in 2004 when he accepted her invitation to produce *Stranded in Suburbia*, her first release for Toronto's Orange Records. "So we always talked about music together, played music together, we toured together, we recorded together, we did all that stuff. But we were always solo artists. So we just didn't think outside of that. It never occurred to us."

Growing up as a goaltender in Winnipeg, Manitoba (he still participates in benefit games with NHL legends and Hall of Famers like Paul Coffey and Lanny McDonald), Doucet traded his hockey stick for an ax. He became a respected producer and bang-up twang guitarist who developed his distinctive style by playing the blues while following Big Dave McClean and Brent Parkin, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Dire Straits and Eric Clapton before discovering Camper Van Beethoven and Marc Ribot.



At age 19, he ran into McLachlan when "she was a combination of sort of Kate Bush but there was something darker about it," he remembered about the sophisticated "King Crimson/Robert Fripp kind of like unidentifiable sounds approach" she and her band took.

That's when Acoustically Inclined, the "Grateful Dead-inspired" group he had joined, agreed to open for "this new artist" at a club called Amigos in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in the early 1990s.

"There was a bit of like a bat-caver kind of like goth-chick thing happening that she had when she was in her early 20s," Doucet said of McLachlan, their gifted and golden-throated Canadian chum with whom they hope to tour again after she finishes her next album. "And we were all completely held in rapture. We were mesmerized by what she had done."

By 1992, he moved to Vancouver and learned that McLachlan was seeking a new lead guitarist after the departure of Stephen Nikleva. Doucet said he learned everything she had written on her early albums *Touch* and *Solace*, auditioned and confidently boasted he knew and could play all her material.

"And, of course, she thought, 'Well, you arrogant little bastard,' " said Doucet, who got the job anyway. A brash and cocky youth who developed his signature sound on a Gretsch White Falcon, Doucet now is humble enough to say, "I've learned a lot of how to be a better guitar player from playing with Sarah," who has this "really amazing sense of rhythm and time and melody" and showed him how to listen, breathe, and relax as a musician.

Doucet went on to form the indie rock group Veal, then made six solo albums, all of which he produced, with Toronto's Six Shooter Records, beginning with *Aloha, Manitoba* in 2001.

He admitted the thought of scrapping his solo career and "going back to the drawing board" was really threatening, so there was "uncharacteristically, a great deal of deliberation," in deciding to unite professionally with McClelland. Seeing married friends such as Sarah Lee Guthrie and Johnny Irion and Chris Masterson and Eleanor Whitmore was encouraging. *They can pull it off, so we can, too.*

"I look back at (the prolonged wait) now and it seems kinda silly," added Doucet, who plays most of the instruments and shares songwriting credits with McClelland on all 12 songs of the 47-minute album. "We didn't want to start a project and confuse people. If we were rock stars, then it wouldn't be confusing. ... But when you're like us, just sort of like poking along, working musicians trying to spend time on the road and making records, and hoping people will pay attention, we couldn't really be cavalier with that. So we thought, 'Well, if we're gonna start a band, we have to make sure that people understand this is not a side project.'



"And so part of what went into that decision was, 'OK, if we're gonna do this, we have to put our solo work on hold. And I don't know for how long. Maybe for two years, maybe for four years, maybe forever. I guess we'll just wait and see how much of a trajectory, how much a lifespan Whitehorse has. But I think that was the right decision. Like I think we did it right by putting all our eggs in that one basket.'"

Added McClelland: "I think it happened at the right time for us."

The end result is a gutsy, twisted take on Americana -- Canadiana, anybody? -- with a phenomenal vocal blend (Doucet refers to their "third voice") that features McClelland's lovely pipes on tunes such as "Devil's Got a Gun" and "Out Like a Lion." She credits her skill to McLachlan ("Sarah has forced me to sing five octaves above what I ever thought imaginable"), along with years of backing vocals and previous experiences with Doucet that helped develop their harmonies.

"So I don't think it was a conscious thing that we had to try to achieve," she added. "We just got there naturally. We had that chemistry to begin with. But it does kind of feel like one voice at this point when we sing together. We don't have to think about it, we don't

have to think about following each other ..."

At this point in the conversation, husband pays wife a compliment, but it nearly leads to their only disagreement during the course of an hourlong interview.

Luke: "Melissa's really consistent (vocally). Like in a studio when we're working on records and she's doing vocal passes, that's usually when I nap. ... And it's not like I think, 'Well, I'm not needed here. I'm gonna go to sleep.' The process is so specific. In order for me to participate and be critical or creative and say, 'Hey why don't you change this, why don't you change that,' I have to focus so hard that my brain hurts because she's so consistent. She's such a good singer. Like nothing's ever out of tune and she can go six passes in a row and they're almost all identical. ... Whereas I am totally inconsistent. ..."

Melissa: "That's not true."

Luke: "Well, OK. I don't know, maybe, it seems to me ... I mean, you've sometimes even said ..."

Melissa: "Oh, you know, yeah, you know what that is? That is true. Sometimes with your melodies, but that's a good thing. You change it up a lot. So it keeps me on my toes. *(laughs)* So what are you gonna do?"

Luke: "Yeah, I can't imagine it's easy to sing along with somebody who's not singing the same thing every night. Like I try to sing the same thing, but I forget. My mind wanders and then I just meander."

Any married couple can identify with the exchange, and Doucet likes to use the Bonnie and Clyde analogy -- that first appeared when The Globe and Mail of Toronto called Whitehorse "the Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway of Canadian roots rock" -- to sum up his relationship with McClelland.

Asked what the advantages and disadvantages of working together full-time are, he said, "Well, the advantage I think is that when we rob a bank, we always have somebody to back us up. There's always a getaway driver."

But seriously, folks ...

"It's interesting 'cause we're up on stage and we're playing music together and people are watching and there's a certain voyeurism that goes along that ...," added Doucet, whose imaginary partners-in-crime-with-McClelland tableau comes out on songs such as "Mexico Texaco" (*And why can't I take this car and drive it to Mexico / We'll rob a Texaco in Santa Fe where we'll run out of gas*) and 2011's "Killing Time Is Murder."

"But the reason it resonates a little bit is because it sort of feels like we're getting away with something. You're not supposed to do this. You're not supposed to work with your spouse. ... *And we're getting away with it.* And not only are we getting away with it, but we're having a lot of fun and we're constantly on the move, we're constantly on the run (once homeowners in Hamilton, Ontario, before moving to Manhattan, then selling their expensive apartment last year, they basically live on the road now). And there are people pulling for us. When you watch Bonnie and Clyde, you're pulling for them. You want

them to get away, you want them to succeed. ... And that's why sometimes it feels like we're robbing a bank and there are people lined up along the streets clapping for us to escape."

Now, playing and selling music to the public shouldn't equate to stealing money from unsuspecting customers, but McClelland finds a way to make the comparison to a couple of infamous crooks seem appropriate.



"I like it. I'll take it," said McClelland, a Chicago native who considers herself "pretty much Canadian through and through" after spending most of her life north of the border. "But, you know, music, it's really a lifestyle. It's not as if we're going to work and then coming home at the end of the day. It's kind of an all-or-nothing career path. You kind of have to find someone who's in it with you in order for a relationship to work. So the fact that we share this passion, we share this kind of delusion and craziness, the little dash of delusion that it takes to follow down this path, it really is an adventure.

"It can be intense at times, no doubt. But there are so many times where we're onstage and we both have a flash of realization of just where we are and what we're doing and how much we love it and how beautiful it is that we get to share that moment, that feeling. So we recognize that and we step back a lot and appreciate that. But it is an interesting life 'cause it's everything. We sleep and breathe it. It's all-encompassing."

That eventually leads to discussing the album title. *The Fate of the World Depends on This Kiss*, words they first saw on a Wonder Woman comic book in a Vancouver diner, were spoken by McClelland at the end of the opening cut of Whitehorse's 2011 self-titled debut album, which also includes "Passenger 24" from her second solo album, 2006's *Thumbelina's One Night Stand*.

"I realize it's a dramatic title," Doucet said of their latest work. "And I think there's two things at play. One is, well there's a romantic angle. We're a married couple and we're

breaking one of the sort of major commandments of marriage, which is that you don't work together. So there's certainly an element of suspense and of, I don't know, it's not apocalyptic but there's an intensity and a suspense in what we're doing. Are we supposed to be doing this? Is it going to work?"

The other, he said, deals with living in a time when "apocalyptic things seemed to have grabbed our attention like rarely ever before."

They touched on trivial matters such as misinterpreting Mayan calendars but also believe more serious activity and issues (the Occupy Movement, Idle No More, Arab Spring and global warming) are worth acknowledging. And while they say this isn't a political record, Whitehorse boldly included political elements in songs such as "Devil's Got a Gun" and "Wisconsin."

Look for some of those themes -- with a jolt of electricity produced from various instruments, two plugged-in performers, one shared condenser mic and a looping machine -- on their 2013 tour.

Last year, Whitehorse played in their namesake town and Dawson City, a six-hour drive farther north that's frequented by surly gold-miners. So if they can make it there, they can make it anywhere. And even though this at-large Canadiana couple aren't really outlaws, keep your eyes on them.

Someday, the faces of Luke Doucet and Melissa McClelland might even land on America's "Most Wanted" posters.

Publicity photo by Paul Wright + Concert photos by Michael Bialas