

BACKSTAGE PASS

>>> ANTONIA SANTANGELO

POINT OF VIEW

GREG DULLI'S

IRVING PLAZA, NEW YORK CITY

TWILIGHT SINGERS



"Do you mind if I smoke?"

questions the charming Greg Dulli, seated on a couch backstage at New York City's Irving Plaza prior to this evening's Twilight Singers' show. Receiving an answer in the negative, the pre-show interview begins, eventually taking on the air of a confessional for this brutally honest musician. Dulli proves an interesting conversationalist, exhibiting a sensitive, lusty and even romantic nature as he candidly responds to questions. He is also not averse to turning those questions on this interviewer, confirming that it is impossible to conduct a straight-up interview with this man; or for him to play a straight ahead show for that matter.

There is always an element of intimacy between this performer and his audience. Responding to his own question as to whether this writer had ever been in love, Dulli states, "I am sure I have been, and I am pretty positive I will be again." As this statement comes from a man who has penned some of the most heartbreaking songs one could nurse a whiskey bottle to, it is difficult to challenge. Not to mention his re-working of some of the most passionate songs in music on his latest endeavor, *She Loves You*; a collection of covers energized with soul and cloaked in dark, rock overtones. On the album, Dulli tackles an impressive trove of work by female performers (a common practice for Dulli) including Björk and Nina Simone, as well as

other monumental artists such as The Beatles and Marvin Gaye. Smiling in a delicate twirl of smoke Dulli looks forward to the evening's performance, remarking, "I want them to escape into my world for a few hours. I want them to be lifted, conflicted, happy, sad, pissed off, sexually aroused." As former front man of the beloved alternative rock outfit The Afghan Whigs, Dulli has a reputation for engendering all these emotions within his heart wrenching lyrics, his love of soul and his flair for rock. His current relationship with the Twilight Singers is no different in this respect, but the material is even moodier, warmly wrapped within an exotic cinematic



PHOTOGRAPH BY LILIANA C. ARANDA

texture often laced with vivid imagery. It has the ability to rock, tear at the soul or calm the listener within a single phrase; and the fans are lined up outside Irving Plaza for a taste of it.

As part of the CMJ Music Festival's tight schedule of events, the band is fittingly scheduled to hit the stage at the darkest hour of night. As the doors open at midnight the crowd patiently waits for the late show to begin. Finally The Twilight Singers take the stage, comprised of Jon Skibic (guitar), Bobby MacIntyre (drums), Michael Sullivan (bass), Manuel Agnelli (electric piano) and funky back-up vocalist Steve Myers. Beaming with energy and exuding swagger Dulli hits the stage in his usual shadowy black attire, giving the

audience a nod and leaning right into his mic (custom made to capture his ashes and hold his drink) before summoning "Teenage Wristband." Tearing into the tantalizing opening lyrics, "You say you wanna go there, Ride then..." Dulli quickly loosens up this legion of panting, patient fans who are already echoing his every word. Such was the potent start that would foreshadow an intensive, high caliber performance, a show Dulli himself declared on-stage, early on, was saved from hours of his trademark banter for lack of cocktail preparation.

Seemingly exhilarated, his voice dead-on and his band red hot, Dulli is able to inflame the crowd with anticipation. As the show takes shape, it becomes apparent that *She Loves You* would be the centerpiece of the evening. Tracks from this gorgeous album of covers take center stage, sung with exquisite care, amongst a selection of tracks from earlier Twilight Singers' discs and a sprinkling of Afghan Whigs tunes (namely the bewitching "Faded" from *Black Love*). It is obvious Dulli is fully prepared to entertain this night, confident in his ability to conjure the necessary passion and sentiment he had referred to pre-show, in order

to perform the songs as they are meant to be performed. "If, when I'm doing the set list, I feel disconnected, I won't do it. It's just something I can't do. They are not worth the drama that they bring up in me."

This night, it is clear he is able to summon the appropriate spirits as "Annie Mae" is sung with so much power it leaves him virtually breathless. "Decatur St.," with its exploding chorus gets the audience fully geared up, as does "Papillion," which eventually evolves into Def Leppard's "Photograph," the song, Dulli explains to the audience, that was his favorite in high school. In the midst of the set though, in classic Dean Martin, showman style, he takes a seat at the edge of the stage, equipped with a cigarette and drink, locks eyes with a

few lucky ladies and slithers into the Zombies' "Time of The Season." "What's your name? Who's your daddy? Is he rich like me?" he sings steamily, further seducing the enraptured fans.

The show is a powerful one, even as he takes solo to the piano to chime in with the "hushed" portion of the show, an intimate time for Dulli to bond with the audience alone. Singing "The Killer" it was clear he was feeling it and even shouted out that he was "Doing it...and it was scary" (referring to an earlier interview statement explaining he would never do a full-on solo show, as it was too terrorizing). That said, any audience member would be hard pressed to spot an anxious bone in his body.

A fantastic performance, the show culminates with the steady, teasing execution of "A Love Supreme" and its slide into "Please Stay (Once You Go Away)," two tracks situated together on the new record. They fit so beautifully together and tempt a climax of electric piano frantically dancing to Dulli's determined vocals. Equally brilliant is the song he had previously mentioned looking forward to singing the most this evening. "I love them all, [but] my favorite song to sing is 'Black Is The Color Of My True Love's Hair.' I will probably sing that for the rest of my life. It resonates deeply in me." And it was dynamic, a true treat to hear live, especially for those who are familiar with the Nina Simone song and can appreciate the lusty longing in Dulli's masculine take on it. As the show came to a close around 3AM, the audience was intoxicated and eager for more, likely wondering what's up next for Mr. Dulli.

"I'm about half way through the next album" he mentioned pre-show, "and it is considerably more rock. But that is not to say there aren't numerous other colors going on. The band that I have right now, I'm hanging on to them to make a record. I have a bonding with the group, they are great players. The stuff we are doing now hits harder and is lyrically a bit more oblique; whenever I can hide behind the oblique wall, I love to do it."