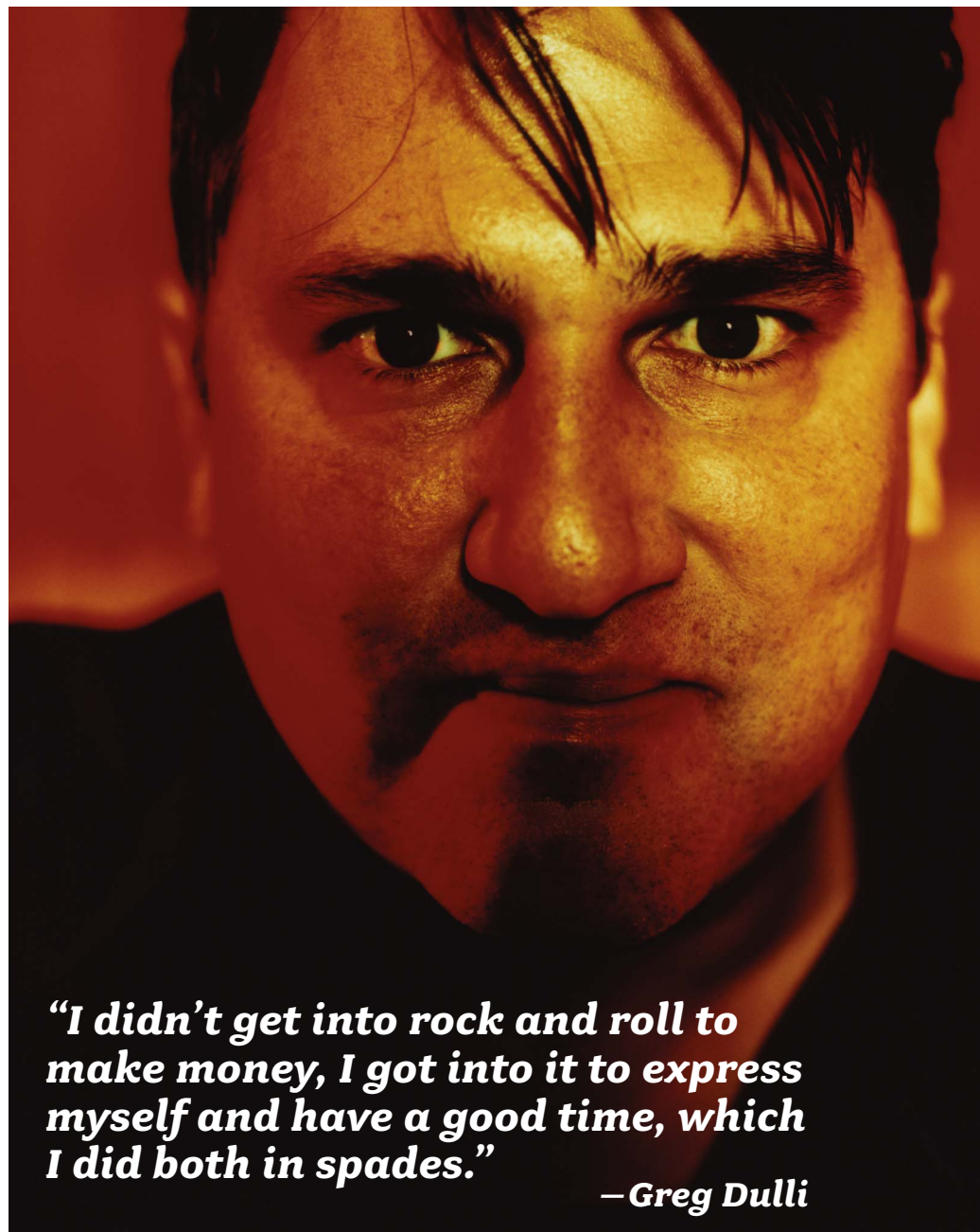


THE TWILIGHT SINGERS

by Wes Orshoski



"I didn't get into rock and roll to make money, I got into it to express myself and have a good time, which I did both in spades."

—Greg Dulli

Inside the swank VIP room of a dark bar off Sunset Boulevard—a good jaunt from its glitzy Hollywood stretch—Greg Dulli's leaning back in his seat, his foot on the coffee table. As he takes a drag on a cigarette, a devilish grin spreads his face. "I'm blissed out, man," he says, smiling.

If the 42-year-old brain trust of The Twilight Singers and ex-frontman for The Afghan Whigs looks pleased with himself, he has reason to be. Since the 2001, Dulli has delivered a string of sexy, arty records that have consistently drawn praise, while turning his avant-rock collective into an underground sensation. Through a sublime blend of sound, image and presentation, albums like *Powder Burns* and *Blackberry Belle* have (a full decade beyond the Whigs' heyday) returned Dulli his status as one of rock's most respected and stylish cult figures. And it suits him perfectly.

Photos Sam Holden; Wes Orshoski (live)

But if zen-like following a recent vacation with friends in Hawaii, Dulli notes that all has not been so blissful since the Whigs' demise. If revered as a debonair hero of alternative rock, something of a meld of James Dean and Trent Reznor, Dulli says there was a time about seven years ago when the line between his unhinged persona and the real him began to blur.

Like others before him, offstage he began using cocaine as a substitute for the adrenal rush of live performance. "I had always dabbled in it—I liked other things more—but once I started... I think there's a falseness that goes along with that that you don't even realize is happening until you're a full-blown addict, and that's what happened to me. I lived in New Orleans and I could get it any time, anywhere, usually for free."

After snuffing out interventions attempts before they could happen ("I just wasn't ready to be done when they wanted me to be done."), he kicked the habit cold turkey three years ago. "Ya know, when I started, it was the end of the Whigs, and I was like, 'What am I gonna do next?' I was probably looking for a midwife to take me from one place to another and that was as good as any at the time. It was fun for a long time, but it was simply a replacement, an empty replacement."

If he laments the wasted thousands, he doesn't seem too worse for the wear. He co-owns this Echo Park bar, The Short Stop, and another in town. Here, in this former cop hang-out near Dodger Stadium, Dulli has created a tangible extension of his music, interests and personality. Aglow in red lighting, and lined with black leather booths, the bar blends its

former life with vintage Dulli: With framed team photos of long-gone Dodger clubs are a framed poster from the fabled "Black Woodstock" Wattstax concert at the L.A. Coliseum and a Miller Genuine High Life beer sign made for black bars in the seventies. Other holdovers include glass cases full of police badges and a group of gun lockers, where side arms went before drinks were poured. The railings leading into the side room are nightsticks bolted into the wall.

"I have investments now that make me a player in the adult world," he says. "They allow me to not worry about music paying the bills. I didn't get into rock and roll to make money, I got into it to express myself and have a good time, which I did both in spades."

Born to a teenage mother in Hamilton, Ohio, some 20 minutes from Cincinnati, Dulli was weaned on his mom's love for soul music, while his grandparents turned him onto country and his friends introduced him to the Stones, Zeppelin, AC/DC. At 15, he was playing in bars: "There were 27-year-old ladies eyeballing me like Mrs. Robinson, and I had them, and I never wanted to let them go."

And he didn't. In 1986, he co-founded the Whigs, which issued a string of discs for Sub Pop before hitting with 1993's *Gentleman*. If follow-ups like *Black Love* and *1968* were lauded, the



band's 15 minutes were through by the end of the decade, and the band was done by 2001.

"I loved being in The Afghan Whigs, and I love them. They're my bros, and we still hang out, we recently got together to record some new songs [for the new retrospective *Unbreakable*], but I love singing harmony, and there was nobody to sing with in the Whigs, which is why I started The Twilight Singers: so I could bring in other singers and sing with them. First it was Harold [Chichester of Howlin' Maggie] and Shawn [Smith of Brad], then Mark Lanegan [with whom he is finishing a new album later this year, under the name The Gutter Twins], and later it became Joseph Arthur, Ani DiFranco, and Petra Haden.

"The thing I wanted to do most was to have the wherewithal to do songs wherever I was, because I move around a lot. I stay part of the time here, part of the time in New Orleans, and I got a gang in New Orleans. So if I'm in New Orleans and I want to do a song, I get that gang together. When I was living in Italy, I had a gang there who I recorded with. When I'm out here, I got a gang out here; I got a gang in New York." (Those gangs have included Kermit Ruffins, Galactic's Stanton Moore and even *Purple Rain* star Apollonia.)

"Wherever I am, I can be The Twilight Singers, and I just did not have that flexibility in the Whigs," he explains. "This band has succeeded based on its own merits, and I think because it's stayed fresh with different people moving through it, and affecting it. I'm the driver, but the passengers make all the difference." ★



Harmonizing with Lanegan in Dublin, November 2006