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RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

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Two halves of a whole

REVIEW BY MICHAEL DWYER

There's a song on Robert Forster's latest record called *I Love Myself and I Always Have*. "I hold myself in high regard," he sings in his tender deadpan way. "And loving yourself shouldn't be that hard." He's knows it's funny, but he's not joking.

The tall half of the Go-Betweens traces his unflinching self-belief to his sunny Brisbane grammar school upbringing at the dawn of the '60s. He was the "golden child" whose offhand eccentricity was rewarded at home and at school. "Confidence was never going to be a problem for me," he notes early in his typically economical memoir.

A quiet conviction of latent greatness would be the most vital piece in one of this country's strangest rock'n'roll success stories. Though he pointedly defers to his late creative soulmate Grant McLennan in the title, it was Forster's almost comical insistence on glory – cultural, popular, global, historic – that ensured his band's legend.

The nascent songwriter romanticises a glamorous future early in his aimless university life, divining links with James Joyce and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; intoxicated by the poetic rebellion of Bob Dylan and Patti Smith and, via his enigmatic new pal McLennan, by the style of European cinema.

Actually, "enigmatic" understates Forster's pencil sketch of the boyish foil who floats in and out of these pages, "his face to the world a sleepy, distant gaze". Initially noncommittal about his friend's rock'n'roll dreams, McLennan comes to the party with a sudden surge of musicality that would produce the band's most accessible songs.

We learn what records he arrived with in vivid detail (Ian Hunter, Jackson Browne, Ry Cooder), but crucial life matters – the early death of his father, the passive income stream from farming stock up north – remain a mystery even to his best friend. A sign, perhaps, of the Anglo reserve that resonates in Forster's possibly overprotective reporting.

We do get brilliant snapshots of telling moments, such as when McLennan returns from holiday with a driver's licence and a

Corolla gifted from his mother. The car runs out of petrol, he leaves it in a ditch and it's stolen. "Grant never drove again. His life one tank of gas," Forster writes, his taut turn of phrase always attuned to the pithy potential of a song title.

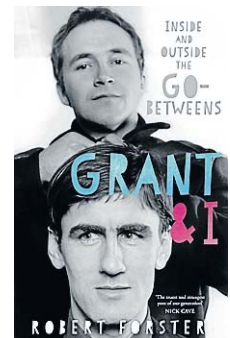
With third Go-Between Lindy Morrison something of a time-bomb in the dual role of drummer and Forster's girlfriend, the band strides and stumbles through the European rock underground of the 1980s with much critical and industrial analysis by the author, but only snatched suspicions of McLennan's headspace at any time.

The pair's reckless decision to sack the band in 1989, resulting in the catastrophic end of McLennan's romance with violinist Amanda Brown, is given the weight of profound regret. Separated by oceans, the two songwriters' friendship becomes an increasingly worrying string of long-distance phone calls and slightly jealous readings of each other's solo work.

As love blooms for Forster in an idyllic German farmhouse, the wasting effects of alcohol and song titles such as *Suicide at Home* foreshadow the later loss of his friend with an anxious ache of helplessness. Even reunited, the distance between them remains such that when Forster confides his life-changing Hep C diagnosis, McLennan's response is "a sad, unreadable nod".

Mercurial is good, of course, in the classic rock'n'roll pantheon to which the Go-Betweens unapologetically aspired. Forster's half of the tale is passionate, funny, unflinchingly honest and ultimately very moving in the hours of his friend's strange, tragically premature passing — happily in the throes of newfound optimism in 2006.

But as with any great record, what we have in the Go-Betweens is a beautiful puzzle that invites imagination to rule.



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Grant & I

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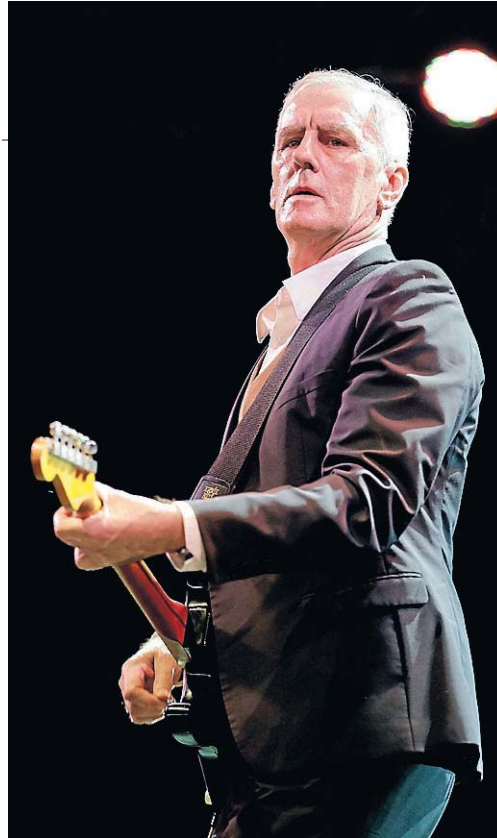
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Robert Forster performs during Splendour in the Grass, in Byron Bay, this year. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES