

The Divine Comedy: Live from the Barbican

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 60 minutes, no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Neil Hannon and Martin Aston discuss The Divine Comedy's 30th anniversary celebrations.

Released in June 2019, The Divine Comedy's twelfth album *Office Politics* was a concept record about the workplace, 'An anxious, dystopian record,' Neil Hannon recalls.

Fifteen months later, the band's core member is confronting a situation that's defined by anxiety and feels uncannily dystopian. Most office workers are working from home and gatherings of people are discouraged. Instead of the five scheduled Barbican shows celebrating The Divine Comedy's 30th anniversary, each showcasing two albums from their illustrious history, there is this one-off streamed and socially-distanced event with a hits and fan favourites focus. 'We're really missing something without a full-capacity audience, all the buzz and adrenalin,' says Hannon. 'We'll just have to use our imagination instead.'

Hannon's imagination has guided him towards a divine and comedic style of chamber-pop, shot through with a streak of 60s classicism. For the full works, there is a new twelve-volume box set, *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*, named after the painting (circa 1545) by Agnolo Bronzino, 'because it sums up everything I've ever written about,' Hannon explains. 'Sex, love, a lot of folly, and the passing of time.'

The box set comes with archive-raiding bonus tracks and photos, plus extensive liner notes by Hannon. 'Helping put all that together is what I've mostly done during lockdown,' he recalls. 'As well as teaching the band all the songs in the catalogue for the shows that were cancelled.' He was lucky with lockdown, he says. 'I was already being anti-social and living in the middle of nowhere [outside of Dublin, though he's from Derry across the border]. But in the last month or two, I've started feeling antsy.'

Hannon has been making records since the original The Divine Comedy trio of schoolfriends released the mini-album *Fanfare For The Comic Muse* in 1990. For years, he's disowned the record, a stylistic anomaly with a pronounced R.E.M. influence. 'We were indie kids in thrall to bands like R.E.M., Ride and Pixies,' Hannon recalls. 'But nothing happened with the record, and the drummer and bassist got fed up and left. I suddenly realised I could do whatever I liked: I could live my dreams! The next The Divine Comedy album was called *Liberation*.'

Hannon's dreams were made real like a jigsaw puzzle, fitting the pieces together. 'I was fascinated by synth-pop, elements of prog, The Beatles, classical, jazz, chanson. And my all-time hero is Scott Walker. I ate it all up and spat it out again. I also ate lots of books and movies because, at the time, I wasn't a social animal. But there was still a frisson of a youthful sex drive! Which came out in a kind of nerdy, Biggles fashion. The Divine Comedy became music that I wanted to exist, only I hadn't heard it yet – apart from Scott Walker's run of albums in the late 60s, a kind of orchestrated music noir.'

Yet Hannon's oddball, nerdy persona is comparatively light – and witty too. Take 'The Booklovers' from the 1994 album *Promenade*, where he listed over 70 authors interspersed with impersonations and aphorisms. 'I always wanted to be Ian Curtis, but I didn't have it in me,' he says. 'I suppose I've been blessed with a reasonably happy disposition.'

Rather than darkness and depression, satire and fantasy became The Divine Comedy touchstones, centred around Hannon as a debonair dandy and Lothario, part Noël Coward and part Michael Caine in *Alfie*. In 1996, Hannon named an album *Casanova*, which became his big breakthrough, driven by the irresistible three-minute hit singles 'Something for The Weekend' and 'Becoming More Like Alfie'.

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‘Since I was thirteen,’ Hannon says, ‘I’d wanted to be a pop star: it seemed like a much more interesting job than any other. I’d seen the Britpop scene brewing, and I loved a lot of what informed Britpop, like The Kinks and movie soundtracks, I thought, I need to get on this bandwagon. I literally jumped on it!’

By the end of the 90s, ‘The scene had changed. Nobody wanted a man flouncing around with an orchestra behind them. I split up the band I’d kept through the 90s and started again.’ 2001’s *Regeneration* was, ‘more serious’ (and guitar-led) but Hannon admits he, ‘missed the fun.’ Over the next five albums – *Absent Friends* (2004), *Victory for The Comic Muse* (2006), *Bang Goes the Knighthood* (2010), *Foreverland* (2016) and *Office Politics* (2019) – Hannon has continued to balance the divine with the comedic – and the occasional dystopian overview. Next year, if the world gets a break and The Divine Comedy’s rescheduled Barbican showcases go ahead in the autumn, Hannon and his fans will properly celebrate every facet of Venus, Cupid, folly and time.

Performers

Neil Hannon vocals, guitar

Andrew Skeet piano

Ian Watson accordion

Simon Little bass

Tim Weller drums

Tosh Flood guitar

Produced by the Barbican



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