

# WE ARE AUGUSTINES

## BIOGRAPHY

Written by Stephen Brolan

“Keep your head up, kid/I know you can swim/But you’ve got to move your legs...”

March 2011 – a ship on the River Thames in London. Though the weather is unusually clement for this time of year, the waters beneath us continue to ripple at a seasonal gallop, rocking the ship’s hull back and forth in a rhythmic canter. Billy McCarthy and Eric Sanderson, the engine room behind Brooklyn, New York’s We Are Augustines, are themselves no strangers to turbulent waters. McCarthy in particular, whose volatile upbringing is candidly documented in both his band’s biographical notes and the lyrics of his songs, has felt himself frequently capsized by the vagaries of life. Having spent much of his formative years in foster care – a castaway from a schizophrenic mother and a non-existent father – a sense of self-reliance is perhaps more finely attuned in him than most. Sitting here now on this floating pub, prior to his band’s first major UK gig in front of 1,000 people, McCarthy’s enthusiasm for his current situation is addictive (“Hey! – we’re on a fucking boat in London!” he realises with frequent relish), yet his affable characteristics also betray a certain gravitas. Like a child who’s been told one too many lies, there’s a sense of restraint – like the very fabric in front of him could vanish in a puff of smoke at any time. He says the word ‘present’ a lot – though not the gift-wrapped kind – like a man holding on to the NOW with white-knuckle determination. He is also given to shaking his head, with an almost cartoonishly grim disbelief, especially when hitting upon something fortuitous. Through all the upheaval and broken promises that have come, Billy McCarthy is a man who takes nothing for granted.

“It’s quite gratifying to be where we are now,” he says, reflecting on the past two years, which has seen We Are Augustines rise from the ashes of his former band Pela, which had achieved significant success with debut (and only) album Anytown Graffiti before collapsing from personal tensions brought about by the industry at large.

“With Pela, we made great songs and did great shows,” continues Sanderson, the other survivor from the Pela wreckage. “We stayed away from labels for so long, but the minute we opened ourselves up to the industry, it got us!”

Since parting ways in 2008 with Great Society, the indie label that released much of the Pela material, the pair have remained unsigned, taking a more cautious stance into the Augustines project. But there’s more to this hypersensitive tiptoeing than simple contractual concerns – something far more personal lurks beneath.

Much of the material on forthcoming album Rise Ye Sunken Ships – most of which was written and recorded when Pela still existed – documents perhaps the most traumatic period of Billy McCarthy’s life. Having undergone the pain of a mentally ill, drug-addicted mother taking her own life when he was just nineteen, in 2009, McCarthy was to undergo a virtual déjà vu experience as his younger brother James, also a diagnosed schizophrenic, hung himself while still in the apparent care the hospital that was supposed to be treating him. Having been songwriting for only a couple of years following the death of his mother, initial forays into compositional catharsis fell short (“I lacked the vocabulary and subtlety”), but by the time of James’s death, a virtually obsessive McCarthy had assimilated his understanding of the world with the nuances of his craft.

“There were years of my life that just blend into each other, because all I cared about was writing,” he recalls, shaking his head. “It was just pure dedication...” His trails off, wrestling with a notion. “When you believe in your art – whether you’re a writer or musician or whatever – you’re essentially believing in yourself. I never put that together until recently.”

“Billy is incredibly passionate,” Sanderson continues. “For him, writing is not just sitting down with a pen and paper – it’s a lifestyle you live and breathe every day. . .” – to which McCarthy, whose conversational lunges are frequently housed in story-telling, recalls an anecdote from his days working at a restaurant. “There was a painter, a writer and a photographer,” he begins, almost joke-like. I ask if it is one; it assuredly isn’t. “There was this big debate when I said I wasn’t working the next weekend, and they were giving me a really hard time about it. I just slammed my fists on the table and said: ‘I don’t know whether you know this or not, but there’s no such thing as a part-time artist!’ They all just looked at their shoes. I felt really bad about it, but I also felt it had to be said. . .” – a pensive pause – “As much for my benefit as theirs, in hindsight.”

Sitting between Sanderson and McCarthy is like watching a game of conversational table tennis – a to-ing and fro-ing made all the more dizzying by the fact it’s happening on a boat. Like an old married couple, the pair seem to be completely aligned to each other’s thought patterns. With Sanderson having shared very similar personal traumas to McCarthy – particularly his own family history of substance abuse – it’s small wonder the pair are so reciprocal. In fact, after the collapse of their previous endeavour, the two isolated themselves against what had gone before – with the exception of maintaining contact with one other. By then, amid the remnants of Pela’s demise, a disenchanted McCarthy, armed with a batch of these songs that documented his own personal turmoil, felt the respect and trust he and Sanderson had nurtured together was the vital element that could allow them to continue onward.

“We’ve had to realign the way we approach our music,” Sanderson insists. “Not creatively as such – that’s stayed the same. It’s more how you interact, and the people you choose to surround yourself with. We had to adjust because we recalibrated everything, and the only way for us to go on was through complete ruin and destruction. For us to follow the same path again would be lunacy!”

And so, from out the lunacy their previous contractual agreements had bound them to, We Are Augustines essentially self-financed the completion of the new album, unsure exactly how the record was going to reach its audience but certain only that the personal nature of the material was far too precious to surrender to just anyone. To launch Rise Ye Sunken Ships, McCarthy and Sanderson needed to be captains of their own destiny – the vessel they were sailing charting waters only they feel they could navigate. “You have to remind yourself you do have control over things,” McCarthy says fervently.

“The timeline to where we’re at now, we don’t feel robbed or any remorse,” continues Sanderson, reflecting very briefly – reluctantly – on their past shortcomings, before insisting: “We try every day to focus on the immediate circumstances and seeing the bigger picture. As hard as it is when things aren’t going well for you, it’s important to recognise that’s just part of the puzzle. . .”

Essentially existentialists, both Sanderson and McCarthy, who have traversed personal and professional turmoil to be where they are now – literally and figuratively bobbing up and down on an uncertain vessel on strange waters – know too well that life cannot be lived in isolation – that turbulence is just another ripple in the bigger picture. For Sanderson in particular, it is important to acknowledge the course you’ve taken.

“We couldn’t be where we are now if Pela didn’t exist and if it wasn’t destroyed by the industry. So to look at that as a bad thing would be disrespectful to my friends and the time we spent doing that. The lessons have been invaluable. . .”

McCarthy picks up the thread. “The lessons we’ve learned are like lanterns illuminating a path for us,” he says earnestly, again shaking his head. “And like Eric says, if we didn’t crash and burn, we probably still wouldn’t know where we’re going. . .”

With navigation essential to survival, We Are Augustines are steering a course by way of a chart speckled with the fragments of shattered dreams and guiding lights long extinguished. Not the easiest of paths to

traverse, but then plain sailing was never their command. With Rise Ye Sunken Ships, however, a titanic struggle and musical vision is at last about to come to the surface.

Stephen Brolan,  
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