

Imagination Takes You Everywhere dEUS and the Rest of the World

September 2011, the Antwerp rock group dEUS brings out its sixth CD, *Keep You Close*. As with the band's previous releases, that's a major event for the Flemish press. That month newspapers and weeklies publish full-page – positive – reviews and interviews with front man Tom Barman that fill several pages, you can hear talks with him on various radio stations, you can read profiles about him and the other members of the group, and background stories about the history of dEUS... Under the motto 'What's left to do?' one magazine even makes a strip cartoon about dEUS. In the slipstream of the enormous press interest there also appears a series of columns that have that very media exposure as their subject. Worth noting: this time Holland joins, for one day Tom Barman is the editor of de Volkskrant's cultural section.

An exaggeration? Maybe a slight one, but, after the rather distant and unbalanced *Vantage Point* (2008), *Keep You Close* is another exceptionally good dEUS album – the comeback that fans had hoped for. In addition, Barman again shows himself to be the interviewee of everyone's dreams – a rarity among pop musicians. In his enthusiasm he regularly makes frank, pithy and well structured statements about himself and the world around him, like: "People in permanent relationships don't like sex". Moreover, the background of the other group members is more relevant now than ever before. Unlike the previous CDs, *Keep You Close* is a collective achievement in which Tom Barman played the part of director rather than commander.

But most likely the chief explanation for the benevolence of the journalists is the credit dEUS has been living off ever since its debut with *Worst Case Scenario* (1994). With that disc the group smoothed the path for more or less all the Flemish rock and pop bands that came after it. Suddenly it seemed possible to make exciting and fresh music in little Flanders, and to be suc-

cessful with it. dEUS inspired groups all over Europe to have a shot at fame in the predominantly English-speaking pop world. In Belgium the band was not only at the origin of a generation of musicians that can live from its music (Daan, Hooverphonic etc.), but since the middle of the nineties the flow of new, extremely talented and successful groups has been almost incessant. In short, thanks to dEUS Belgian pop has come of age. And that despite the fact that the group itself has had anything but a steady course since its debut.

The eventful history of dEUS – in 2012 the group will be twenty years old – means it also provides material for a great many fascinating stories. During this period the group got off to a lightning start, but then important opportunities were missed; important group members left and others came along in their place; the group was once almost at its last gasp and then they achieved artistic triumphs again. "And I was a rollercoaster of the kind / That needs to ride so high / to dive so low", sings Barman in the title number from *Keep You Close*. It's about a failed relationship, but could equally well be about the career of his group.

Reading the above, you might think that dEUS and front man Tom Barman have got it all nicely under control, recognized for their past achievements, praised for their new disc. Certainly if you also know that *Keep You Close* rapidly became a best seller in Belgium, that the dEUS concerts in the country's largest halls were sold out in 2011 and that in 2012 the group will be at the internationally renowned Belgian rock festival Rock Werchter. Moreover the group is also playing in Holland, France and Southern and Eastern Europe in 2012, always to a full house.

And yet something still niggles. Barman wants more, recognition and success in Great Britain and even more in the United States, the Valhalla of pop music. Granted, dEUS has already played there and even made an impression, certainly in the United Kingdom. Gary Lightbody and Guy Garvey, the front men for the great British pop



dEUS with (left to right) Stephane Misseghers, Klaas Janzoon, Mauro Pawlowski, Tom Barman and Alan Gevaert © PIAS.

groups Snow Patrol and Elbow, take their hats off to Barman and his band. But this isn't enough to satisfy the restless and ambitious front man. A breakthrough in America remains an issue for him. He even wrote a song on the CD *Vantage Point* about his wrestling with this, 'Popular Culture': "*Cause now you know it's not great / if you don't come from the States / you will always be late to be in popular culture.*"

The recent media storm over the new dEUS record leaves a murky picture behind on this subject. On the one hand the group members swear in interviews that they have given America up and that extensive touring in foreign parts isn't a foregone conclusion with the young fathers in the group. On the other hand you read in reviews that *Keep You Close* is being promoted internationally and that it will even be the make or break CD for the group abroad. And isn't the American, Greg Dulli, from the Afghan Whigs and the Twilight Singers, singing with them on *Keep You Close* to attract the attention of the music press

in the USA? And especially, doesn't Tom Barman continually keep the door ajar in interviews when he talks about going international, knowing full well that it will make the group uneasy again while at the moment it's more stable than ever before? "If something nice comes up, then we must go, and that'll mean we have to discuss it and then there may be fireworks, yeah", was to be heard recently in a newspaper.

What the future has in store for dEUS seems to depend above all on the opportunities the group gets to play abroad. We shall just have to wait and see what choices dEUS makes. In any case it's clear for Barman. "*Imagination if you dare / can take you almost anywhere*", as he sings in 'Dark Sets In'.

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