



# The Vanity Project

## biography

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It takes a healthy dose of self-awareness to dub your solo work The Vanity Project -- and Barenaked Ladies' frontman Steven Page has plenty of that. It helps if that work holds enough sharp hooks and smart songcraft to make it clear that the moniker is anything but accurate -- and the self-titled debut from The Vanity Project most assuredly packed with both.

"When you're recording, you have to put a name on tapes, and I put that on jokingly at first," says Page. "But I kept coming back to it, because I wanted to convey the fact that it's not really a 'band' in the standard sense. It's always been a fantasy of mine to have something I could be involved with, bringing in different people to collaborate from album to album."

Page's partner on The Vanity Project's first offering is Stephen Duffy, the British pop maestro whose recordings under the Lilac Time moniker (as well as under his own name) have long been prized by fans of wistful jangle-pop. Since Page and his fellow Ladies can be counted in that category, it's no surprise that they've collaborated with Duffy for more than a decade -- dating back to 1994's *Maybe You Should Drive* album. Page's association with Duffy goes back even further, however.

"The first time I went to England, I bought one of Stephen's albums, and it changed my life. To my 15-year-old ears, it was absolutely perfect," he recalls. "I sent him a fan letter and he was kind enough to write back, and I ended up staying with him when I spent time at Cambridge. So when he asked me to write with him, for me, it was like having the girl of your dreams say 'so, do you want to sleep together?'"

As borne out by the sounds on *The Vanity Project* -- the first release on Flagship Recordings -- the spawn created by their creative union is attractive indeed. From the elegiac tones of the troubadour-styled "Wilted Rose" to the deceptively catchy strains of the reflective "That's All, That's All," the disc combines the poignant and the inspirational with remarkable grace.

The disc is doggedly personal, a trait that's reflected in both the soul-exposing lyrics and the close-to-the-bone recording style -- reminiscent of the endearing raggedness and homespun melodic charm of Paul McCartney's self-titled debut. Some of that vibe was instilled by design, a result of Page's crafting the entire disc in his basement, but some was imparted when recording was nearly thrown off track by Mother Nature's assault on his Toronto-area home.

"There was a lot going on in the world around the time these songs were written, and a lot going on in my own life, like having my studio ruined in a flood," Page says, by way of describing the tone of *The Vanity Project*, which might come as a surprise to listeners accustomed to the lighter vibe of the Barenaked Ladies. "The album is a series of tableaux with a bit of a storyline. It's not intended as a rock opera or anything like that, but there's definitely a thread -- it's about missed chances and bad choices."

While those topics clearly figure into the dozen songs on *The Vanity Project*, Page and Duffy wrap them in sonic blankets that keep the darkness from getting too overwhelming. The sparse, harmonica-laced "Thank



"You For Sharing," for instance, recalls Neil Young, circa *On the Beach*, in its quiet intensity, while "So Cal" is steeped in Brill Building brightness.

"That was every Phil Spector trick we could think of," Page says of the latter song. "I was listening to a lot of Dion, to the Beatles' *Let It Be*, Leonard Cohen's *Death of a Ladies Man* and all sorts of things like that. In retrospect, it seems like the more intimate songs are more produced, more lush, while the acoustic ones have more to do with the world at large."

Considering the fact that the dozen songs (all collaborations, aside from "So Cal," which Page wrote alone) were recorded over the course of a four-year stretch, the album's emotional consistency is admirable -- particularly given the fact that Page was juggling his "other" band at the same time.

"I think it was important for me to decide what I wanted from [The Vanity Project]," says Page. "Did I want to compete with *Barenaked Ladies*? No. Did I want to break away? Not really, no. This was a way for me to express something different, something that was more emotionally raw. The songs express a certain vulnerability, and I wanted to let that show through, rather than worry about making everything sound perfect."

It's one thing to talk about "letting the music speak for itself," but it's another to let it do so as eloquently as Page and Duffy do on *The Vanity Project*. And while the disc's release marks the end of one chapter in the VP saga, Page has given plenty of thought to its future.

"Stephen has handed this one off to me, but it's definitely not a one-off," he says. "I have a wish list of people I'd like to work with. I'd love to try writing with Darryl Dragon -- you know, *The Captain* from the *Captain and Tennille* -- and, of course, Andrew Lloyd-Webber."

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