

“MAYBE THAT NEW ROMANTIC AND BLITZ CLUB SCENE WERE ALL FRIENDS, BUT WE WERE THE OUTLIERS”

FORTY YEARS SINCE FORMING, CAROL DECKER AND RONNIE ROGERS, AKA T'PAU, ARE BACK WITH A NEW ALBUM AND UK TOUR. CLASSIC POP TALKS TO THE FLAME-HAIRED FRONTWOMAN ABOUT MUSIC PRESS HOSTILITY, THE MESSY END OF THE GROUP'S FIRST INCARNATION AND HER CURRENT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BAND'S SIGNATURE SONG.

STEVE O'BRIEN & STEVE HARNELL

As a performer approaches a certain point in their career, the temptation is to go on the road marking 30 years since this and 40 years since that, but not T'Pau... not yet, anyway. Despite 2026 marking their 40th year together, there are no Ruby Anniversary flashes on the poster of the band's latest 14-date jaunt. Instead, it's the Be Wonderful UK Tour 2026, the name of which comes from their upcoming sixth album, the group's first long-player in 11 years.

"It's so nice to be premiering new songs on this tour," Carol Decker tells us from her self-described "worst office in the world"

(she insists it's untidy – we disagree) in Henley-on-Thames. "Though it's terrifying, because they might get no applause whatsoever," she laughs. "Let's hope they don't fuck off to the bar!"

Decker is, you can already see, one of pop's least guarded and most hilariously honest artists. It's her inability to produce a duff quote that should have been celebrated in the band's heyday, but instead T'Pau – and Decker in particular – were too often mocked and belittled by an elitist and misogynist music press.

She remembers the *NME* once putting the group on their cover, specifically for a hit piece. "They thought we were some MOR, cheesy 80s band, that we weren't

hip or cool or nasty enough," she recalls of the indie-leaning inkie. "This journalist called Barbara Ellen asked me maths questions, like what's the square root of whatever. That was another woman just trying to catch me out – I mean, they wouldn't get away with that now.

"I also got absolutely eviscerated by a journo called David Stubbs. He hated me. If he was writing an article about somebody else, he'd still manage to slag me off in it. It was like Trump Derangement Syndrome, but Carol Decker Derangement Syndrome! And it really hurt.

"I got it in the neck a lot. I don't know why I irritated people, because I wasn't smug or big-headed. I might have

T'Pau, led by Carol Decker, release their new album *Be Wonderful* on 10 April and begin a UK headline tour in Leeds the same day



© Tony McGee

Taking their name from a character in *Star Trek*, T'Pau scored their first hit after *Heart And Soul* appeared in a commercial for Pepe Jeans



— been a bit pleased with myself at times, but I wasn't a badly behaved, unpleasant or unkind person. Maybe that's what they didn't like. Maybe I should have thrown a television out of the window?"

IN HER OWN WRITE

All this is a bracing reminder of how hostile the press could be to female artists in the 80s, an attitude that seems especially indiscriminate when you consider that Decker was no glammed-up corporate mannequin, having co-penned virtually every track on T'Pau's first three albums. As a writer she was nominated for an Ivor Novello for *China In Your Hand* and won an ASCAP Award from the US for debut *Heart And Soul*, sharing those honours with her bandmate and then-partner Ronnie Rogers.

When people discuss T'Pau, it's really Carol Decker and Ronnie Rogers they're

“When Heart And Soul finally did take off it was like holding a comet by the tail. My face was then my fortune.”

talking about. They're the only two remaining from that first iteration of the band, but then T'Pau were never really a gang-of-mates ensemble. The others were procured by their manager when Carol and Ronnie finally found themselves in the studio after several years of working as a pair, the two having met when Carol was a member of Shrewsbury ska outfit The Lazers and Ronnie was the guitarist in rival band The Katz. After starting a relationship, Ronnie joined The Lazers and the two began composing together. Eventually going it alone, they were gigging

and writing for six years before they were signed by Virgin subsidiary Siren, waxing their debut album *Bridge Of Spies* with Queen producer Roy Thomas Baker in the hot seat.

“We picked Roy, but we had the choice of loads of producers,” Carol remembers. A long-time disco nut and Chic freak, she says they'd considered Nile Rodgers for the job, only “that's not who me and Ronnie are as writers.”

You'd have thought that Siren, at the time, would have welcomed a Baker-produced record with open arms, except what they heard they “didn't like at all”, Thomas having compressed the mix for AOR radio in the States. “It had a certain sound on American radio that was fantastic, but it did make it sound weird on your turntable,” Decker says. “So the label were going, ‘This is awful!’”

Siren's fears appeared to be confirmed when the album's lead *45*, *Heart And Soul*, bombed. “So they were like, ‘See, complete rubbish,’ and we were thinking, ‘We're going to get dropped!’” Decker winces at the memory.

That might have been the end of *Heart And Soul*, except the song had a surprise second life when, shortly after, it was picked to soundtrack an advert for

T'Pau long-players *Bridge Of Spies*, *Rage* and *The Promise*, released between 1987 and 1991, all made the UK Albums Chart Top 10



Pepe Jeans. On the back of the advert's popularity, *Heart And Soul* finally became a hit, surging to No.4 in the US and prompting Siren to give it another spin in the UK, where it went Top 5. "When it finally did take off, it was like holding a comet by the tail," Decker reflects about T'Pau's overnight success. "It was everything I ever imagined. My face was then my fortune. I couldn't go into a restaurant without them going, 'Get the best table for Miss Decker!' We were so lucky because we were on Virgin and it was when Richard Branson owned the label and the airline. So if we had international work, we were in first class as a matter of course. I'd been on and off the dole for years and come from a very ordinary family so all this was absolutely bloody fantastic."

One side of stardom that proved unexpectedly hard for Decker, outside of the animosity from corners of the music press, was the lack of camaraderie with other pop stars, which Decker puts down to T'Pau not having emerged from a scene.

"We didn't make any friends at all," she remembers of that first flush of fame. "It was very competitive, and people were quite bitchy about each other. But I think we were probably the same. Maybe that New Romantic and Blitz Club scene were all friends, they had a bit of a club going there, but we were the outliers. We were this odd band from Shropshire and nobody had heard of Shropshire."

DON'T WISH TOO HARD

Though *Heart And Soul* was the band's first chartbuster in the UK and US, it'd be *Bridge Of Spies*' follow-up that would become the song that T'Pau would be most remembered for. Today, Decker's relationship with *China In Your Hand* (No.1 in the UK, Switzerland, Norway, the Netherlands, Ireland, Iceland and Belgium) is a complicated one. As a song, she rates *Heart And Soul* higher, but it's *China...* that gets the biggest whoops from audiences when it's played live. "I love it now," she says of the song that, in 2015, was voted the public's 11th favourite 80s No.1. "It pays the rent. I'm still working all the time and do these massive festivals, largely down to *China In Your Hand*, so I'm super grateful. But yeah, in the years in between, I'd be like, 'I've written other stuff that I think is good, but nobody seems to notice', and that can be really frustrating. When I used to get a bit down about it, my husband would say, 'I bet Madonna's sick to fucking death of *Holiday!*' When you make a massive impact, it seems to be what you're always known for, as opposed to one of those bands who just chips away at it constantly."

Bridge Of Spies, released in September 1987, would become a No.1 success for T'Pau, followed by the No.4-charting *Rage* (1988) and 1991's *The Promise* (UK No.10). With the band's third LP, you'd have thought a Top 10 hit would be something Virgin would've popped the corks for, only T'Pau were dropped by the label shortly afterwards.



Be Wonderful is T'Pau's first new album since 2015's *Pleasure & Pain*

© Tony McGee

A wealth of Wonderful new tunes

T'Pau are keeping it as stylistically varied as ever on *Be Wonderful*, their first new album in 11 years.

Featuring co-writes with Ronnie Rogers alongside bandmates Luke Burnett-Smith, James Ashby and Dave Hattee, Carol Decker explains: "It's the usual eclectic mix of songs Ronnie and I write, which I've said in the past sometimes could have been responsible for us not being as successful as I'd have hoped at points, but I guess the people who like us enjoy that diversity!"

"We've released a few download

singles [in recent years] because at one point we didn't know whether it was worth doing an album. Then we had a change of heart as we had another four or five songs. If you're a creative, it's not something that you can just stop.

"So there's a bostin' rock song called *Read My Lips*, which will be the first single. There's also a couple of huge ballads including *Something*, which is me almost a cappella with strings in the background. It's very emotional, very raw..."

In addition to remixed and remastered

previously released singles, freshly-minted tracks include *Echo*, *Stupid Love Song*, the strings-laden *Showdown* and Fleetwood Mac vibes of *Casual Remark*.

"And *World On Fire* is my take on all the shite that's been going down over the last few years," adds Decker.

"I guess you could call it political but I don't know if I'm taking a side. I'm just observing and watching everything that's been going on as there's no nuance anymore. Everybody's on one side of the fence or the other."

Steve Harnell

"I was deeply hurt and depressed," Carol recalls. "I don't shy from the facts. The figures' trajectory was going down, from quadruple platinum to platinum, but they didn't stick with us to help us climb back up. Also, the label changed. EMI bought Virgin, and in one day the workforce was dramatically reduced and bands got dropped – we were one of them. So all these new people came in and the accountants were crunching the numbers, but they didn't look at it in a human way at all."

It didn't help that the band were imploding. "We started to fall out over terms, conditions and money," Decker explains of the group's

disharmonious end. "That's when the four of them appointed a lawyer, so it was me and Ronnie versus them."

Then, to top it all, Ronnie broke up with Carol. "He decided he wanted, as Ross and Rachel said in *Friends*, 'We're on a break!'" She laughs, adding, "I make light of it now, but it broke my heart at the time."

What followed were a dark few years for Decker ("I was taking antidepressants and drinking myself into the floor," she confesses), until in 1997 she was convinced to go back into the studio. Though released as a T'Pau record, 1998's *Red* is a Decker solo album in all but name, something she says she now regrets. Yet what T'Pau fans really wanted was



Next year, Carol Decker and Ronnie Rogers hope to mark the 40th anniversary of T'Pau's debut LP with a celebratory tour

© Michelle Fredericks

“We had chunks of songs that didn’t come together, so shelved them because you need some distance... so I gave it 11 years!”

— a proper coming together of Carol and Ronnie, something that, a few years previous, looked unlikely. With Decker having embarked on a new relationship with restaurateur Richard Coates and Rogers by then happily married, the two were able to rekindle their friendship in the 2000s. “I was then able to see Ronnie as a colleague,” she says of the pair’s repaired relationship. “I mean, we never fell out. He just wanted some space, so when we came back together, a lot of the decks had been cleared on the emotional side, which was really important for us to be able to work together without having an argument.”

Their platonic reunion led to a bona fide new T’Pau album in 2015, *Pleasure & Pain*, and now a belated sixth, *Be Wonderful*.

“We’ve been writing all this time,” she says of the decade-long gap between LPs. “We had chunks of songs that didn’t come together, so shelved them because you need some distance... so I thought I’d give it 11 years!” she laughs. “So these beautiful bits of songs that were just laying in a file are now going to live.

RUBY CELEBRATION

It’s January when we speak to Carol, with the tour three months away, yet she’s already priming herself, backing off the booze and hitting the gym for cardio and strength training. “Not just to try and not look too tragic in my leggings on stage,” she insists, “but to have a good voice.”

Decker is 68 now but seems to possess the fire and drive of someone half her age, a quality she puts down, quite possibly, to ADHD. “I get bored very quickly and I’ve got a very fast brain,” she states, which might well explain why she’s already eyeing up 2027’s T’Pau activities. Next year marks the 40th anniversary of their 4x platinum debut album, a birthday that her and Ronnie definitely plan to mark.

“What we’re going to attempt, and I’m shooting my mouth off here, is to gig the album in its entirety,” she reveals. “And that’s something we’ve never done before...”

With a mint-fresh album in the offing, a new tour and plans stretching well into next year, it’s clear there’s as much life in T’Pau now as there was 40 years ago. Four decades after composing *China In Your Hand*, it seems Decker and Rogers’ songwriting relationship is just as fruitful as it was then.

“We sometimes fight like cat and dog,” she smiles, “but Ronnie’s such an important part of my life and we’re writing some great songs. I’m very proud of them.” ■

● ***Be Wonderful* is released on 10 April and will be reviewed in our next issue. T’Pau’s UK headline tour runs throughout April. Visit tpau.co.uk for further information.**

One from the family album

Be Wonderful’s cover artwork has a very personal link to Carol Decker’s past – it’s an old family snap that was taken when she was a child.

“I used to stay with my auntie and uncle a lot in Stevenage when it was a new town in the 60s,” Decker explains.

“It was one of those purpose-built towns like Milton Keynes. The idea was that you lived in the same place, you worked in the same place, you shopped in the same place. It was a big experiment where councils tried to build an instant community. I’d stay there a lot with my five cousins, all crammed in one little house.

“I’m about 10 when the photograph was taken. I’ve obviously been asked to pose for it. I’ve got my fingers in my belt. I’m staring straight into the camera and there was just a kind of an innocence but a determination as well I think in my face. My daughter has that exact same look, too...”

“*Be Wonderful*’s title track is a beautiful pure pop song with a really catchy chorus that we’ve been playing for the last couple of months on tour. We’ve tested out a few songs at gigs and that’s been going down a storm.”

Although *Be Wonderful* features all original material, Decker doesn’t rule out a covers project in the future. “I think the attitude to covers has changed. As an original songwriter I used to look down my nose at covers, but I’ve noticed a shift recently with covers bands. Some of them are bloody fantastic. They work so hard to deliver an authentic live show. It’s flipped – people love the songs and don’t possibly mind so much now if it isn’t sung by the original artist as long as it sounds excellent.” SH

