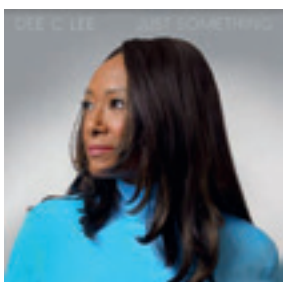


A ONE-TIME MEMBER OF WHAM!  
AND THE STYLE COUNCIL, AS WELL AS  
A SOLO ARTIST, DEE C. LEE HAD ONE  
OF THE MOST SOULFUL VOICES IN  
80s POP. AND NOW, AFTER 26 YEARS  
AWAY, SHE'S FINALLY BACK WITH  
A NEW STUDIO ALBUM.

STEVE O'BRIEN

# Time to Play

**Something new:**  
Four decades after  
her debut single  
*Selina Wow Wow*,  
Dee C. Lee returns to  
planet pop with a  
brand new album,  
*Just Something*,  
released this spring



**F**orty years ago, Dee C. Lee was at the very centre of British pop. A backing vocalist for Wham!, a member of The Style Council and a solo artist in her own right, she seemed to be everywhere and to know everyone. Looking at her discography, it's a roll-call of some of the most seismic pop names of the 80s and 90s – George Michael, Paul Weller, Dr Robert, Guru, Jamiroquai. But then, in 1998, after the release of her fourth album *Smiles*, the trail runs cold. Until now, that is.

"I needed a change, you know," the singer tells *Classic Pop*, 26 years on from that farewell record. "It was different times. I was starting a family etc etc, and I suddenly realised, my children are having children and there's only so many lunches with your friends you can do. It was time to get back to work."

And back to work she went. The resulting album, *Just Something*, then, is Dee C. Lee's first new solo material in over a quarter of a century. It's a heavenly record, a warm, velvety slice of classic soul – and a timely reminder of the power and grace of one of the 80s' most in-demand voices.



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**Life's a beach: Dee in the photo studio with fellow Style Council members Paul Weller and Mick Talbot in 1985, the year of the band's UK No.1 album *Our Favourite Shop* – and their Live Aid performance**

"I'd not physically sung in a long time," she admits. "I've had a couple of shocks, I can tell you! You're lucky that you're not somebody who lives next door to me, cos there are some horrible sounds coming from this house. But they're getting better, because I'm getting singing fit."

We can only imagine that she's exaggerating here – what we'd give to live next door to Dee C. Lee and be treated to a free gig every morning. Music, you see, is baked into her at DNA level. The daughter of a postman (and part-time saxophonist) and a nurse (and part-time singer), her sister sometimes sings and her brother occasionally drums. "I'm the only one who made a living from it," she laughs. "But there was a time when we could have been a Black version of *The Partridge Family*."

Lee says she "never thought that she wouldn't" be a performer full-time. In the late 70s she was a main face on the London scene and on first-name terms with many of the smoke's up-and-coming artists. Juggling a receptionist job with session work, she hooked up with funk/soul outfit Central Line in the early 80s, and through them met Mark Dean from Innervision, the small indie label that had just signed a new pop duo by the name of Wham!

"I was just in the right place at the right time," she smiles, remembering the day in 1982 she first met George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley. "I just thought they were

both really sweet and welcoming. I couldn't help but fall in love with the pair of them."

## LEADING A DUAL EXISTENCE

As a backing vocalist, Lee sang on such Wham! evergreens as *Club Tropicana*, *Bad Boys*, *Wham Rap! (Enjoy What You Do)* and *Young Guns (Go for It)*, while at the same time beaver away on her own material. She admits she was always happiest within a band structure but, as time went on, there was pressure on her to go it alone. "I was told, 'You've got a distinctive voice, you should give it a try,'" she recalls. "I wanted to push myself and see how far I could go as a singer and a songwriter in my own right."

Lee's breakthrough 45, of course, was *See The Day*, a soaring, soul-inflected power-ballad and one of the very first songs she'd written. "I knew it was good," she says, "but the proof of the pudding is when other people hear it, and they freaked out, which made me freak out."

The song, released in 1985, took Lee to UK No.3 and went Top 10 again 20 years later when *Girls Aloud* covered it. "I was so flattered," Lee coos, "cos they were a massive pop group at the time. It just brought tears to my eyes."

At the same time as Lee was forging a path as a solo singer, she hadn't given up on her work as a backing vocalist ("They're a really big deal," she says. "It's another instrument that's really important to the track"), and through the 80s was a sometime

**"I can't wait to get out there and show what I've got in me!" – Lee is relishing her return to music**

member of Paul Weller's post-Jam soul group The Style Council, though when the Modfather approached her, she was one of the few people in the country who'd never even heard of his previous band. (She later married Weller, but that's another story).

"At that time in my life, I'd stopped listening to pop music," Lee explains. "I was only listening to jazz and funk. Not because I didn't like pop, I was just trying to broaden my horizons."

Weller, she says, called her up and offered her a place in his new outfit, having got her phone number from the Musician's Union. "The first track I ever played on," she tells us, "was *Money-Go-Round (Part 1)*. I think that we actually recorded it the same day as my [Lee raises her hands for air quotes] 'audition'. When Paul played it to me, I knew exactly what he was looking for."

The Style Council ground to a halt in 1989, by which time Lee had released her debut solo LP, 1986's *Shrine*. But she was, by this time, "unsure of myself" and wasn't certain she wanted to be front and centre anymore.

"It's weird, having kids was everything that I wanted, but it took a lot of confidence from me," Lee reveals. "Paul and I were still together and he said, 'Why don't you do what you used to do, why don't we put a band thing together and you can hide behind it. You don't have to be Dee C. Lee. And if it comes out and it all goes to hell, it won't really matter. But if it comes out and it does well, you can just enjoy it without the pressure of it being a Dee C. Lee thing.'"

The ensuing band, Slam Slam, was made up of Weller with The Blow Monkeys' Dr Robert and Lee on vocals, producing one album in 1991 and a couple of club hits in *Move (Dance All Night)* and *Free Your Feelings*.

"It was a bit of a house thing, which was really popular at the time," Dee reflects, "and it helped me remember that yes, I can still sing, and yes, I can still perform. But then, after that, it just went quiet again. I'll be honest with you, I don't think anyone was that bothered. The only option to me at that time to do anything would have been to do live work, which after doing so many years of it, I was really reluctant to do."

Instead, Lee retreated from the music biz, devoting her life to bringing up her two children with Weller – Nathaniel and Leah – while at the same time, "trying to work out who I was."

"Suddenly, I wasn't this person who could be up every night and do all the sort of things that I used to do," she sighs. "And it took a really, really long time to get my head around being a parent, being responsible etc. By the time I got the hang of it, they'd all grown up and left home, so I was left a little bit floundering."



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## An artistic identity

Dee C. Lee isn't actually the singer's real name. She was born Diane Catherine Sealy, but was encouraged by a producer friend, Roy Carter, to come up with a pseudonym, to help her with her career.

"He worked with lots of bands," she says, "and he told me, 'One day you're going to do really well for yourself and you'll need a pseudonym.' And I was like, 'What the devil is a pseudonym? What does that mean?' So he told me, and I was, 'Yeah, I like that.' It's nice to have something to hide behind. As an artist, I've always hidden behind bands and without my own band, it's nice to have a recording or performing name. It just helps change the character a little bit. So we were playing about with names around 'Diane Catherine Sealy' and eventually came up with Dee C. Lee. It just came up and flowed nicely."

So does anybody in her personal life call her Dee C?

"Oh, all the time," she laughs. "Dee's actually my nickname. But I answer to quite a lot of names, some of them not even my own, but let's not get into that!"



Dee and Weller in the video for 1985 Style Council single *The Lodgers*

The road to this comeback has been a long one, with Lee admitting she first pondered a return in 2019, before the pandemic scuppered everyone's plans. What changed everything was a chance meeting with Eddie Piller, founder of the Acid Jazz label and a veteran mod-head, at the premiere of the 2020 Style Council documentary, *Long Hot Summers*.

"He was like, 'What are you doing?' And I was, 'I don't know, I want to do something', and so he said, 'Well, let's get you back in the studio!' Hence me signing to Acid Jazz and making this album and getting all this excitement back."

### SOMETHING GOING

Though she had at that point retired from performing, Lee says she was writing songs all the way through her school run years and the tracks on *Just Something* are a blend of older numbers and ones written with this LP in mind, including a co-write with her old Style Council bud Mick Talbot.

"I won't tell you which song it is," she teases, asking *Classic Pop* if we can tell which track her former bandmate co-wrote and performs on. *Walk Away*, we suggest, is the most Style Council-like number on the record. Turns out we're right.

"Style Council stroke Motown," she offers. "But the thing about this album is it really does show all my influences. I listen

to a lot of really, not that obscure, but stuff that's only popular with muso types. But I've also come from a pop background, and I think you can feel that vibe of my whole career in this album."

There's also a song on the record penned by her daughter, Leah Weller, titled *Everyday Summer*.

"I remember when I heard her writing it and she just put it on the back burner," Lee says. "I told her I really liked the song, and she said, 'Well, you have it then'. We needed another couple of tracks and it fitted the criteria. She loves my version, we really went to town on it. It's just a great track, very simple. My daughter really is a bit of a mini me."

There's an obvious glee that Lee feels at being back in the public eye after more than a quarter of a century. And there are, thrillingly, plans to return to live work. If there were doubts about herself in the 90s and noughties, that lack of confidence has been kicked into touch.

"I've never enjoyed it as much as I am right now, recording and making music again," she beams. "It's nice when you walk away from things. Sometimes when you come back, it's really fresh and fabulous. I've been given so much love. I mean, I didn't even think anybody would remember who I was! But for anybody who's still interested, I can't wait to get out there and show what I've got in me."

At the age of 62, it appears that this long-awaited comeback has given Lee a fresh lease of life.

"I feel that there's something in me that as a performer that's left to do," she smiles. "I don't even know what it is but it's very exciting – and it's definitely keeping me on my toes, which isn't a bad thing at all..." ■

● *Just Something* is released via Acid Jazz on 22 March and reviewed on page 83