

Bonetti's Blues

Dundee FC and its Cultural Experiment

Jim Wilkie



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Author of *Across the Great Divide*

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INTRODUCTION

Blues - bittersweet song of life and love
Dark Blues - Dundee Football Club

Bonetti's Blues is for everyone interested in Dundee Football Club. It may be Ivano and Dario Bonetti who direct footballing operations and their exciting, new, cosmopolitan players who entertain the crowd but many others have helped create the right conditions for such an experiment, ex-players, administrators and - not least - the fans. I wanted this book to reflect not only this exhilarating (and occasionally frustrating) time in the club's history but also to remind people of some of the players who established the modern (i.e. post-war) tradition of good football at Dens Park. The key question in my mind was 'Why Dundee FC?'. For almost 20 years they hadn't even played lead guitar in their own city. Why did this imaginative leap of cultural faith happen here?

My thanks go to all the interviewees and, in particular, to Bob Hynd, Dave Forbes and Laura Hayes in the manager's office. Norrie Price's books *Up wi' the Bonnets* and *They Wore the Dark Blue* were invaluable sources of reference.

My love goes to Lorna, Eoghan, Jasmine and Dundee Gran, and I think it also appropriate to mention my favourite Chicago blues singer, the late Chester Burnett, aka 'Howlin' Wolf', who was born the year Dundee won the Scottish Cup.

FOREWORD

I first saw Dundee play (against United) in 1956 and I have watched them to a greater or lesser degree every season since. Having seen them win the League and play to a high standard in Europe, it goes without saying that the level of my commitment waned somewhat as I began to trudge to places like East Stirling (or Falkirk as it's known in the parallel world) in search of positive results and better football. Events of the last two seasons have brought me a whole new appreciation of the game and of the club. I wanted to record one story of how tradition, imagination and industry can maybe not *transform* people's lives but certainly brighten them through something as mundane or beautiful as a game of football.

I am, of course, talking for myself but another individual whose life was brightened by recent developments at Dundee Football Club was a big Dundee fan, Gerry McGrath, who died shortly before this book was published. I first met Gerry in the '60s when we were both teenagers in bands at the Top Ten Club and I will retain an admiration for his singing all my life. I was privileged to sing with the Dundee Mafia on a short tour in the early '80s and, when I subsequently wrote about them in the book *Blue Suede Brogans*, Gerry chided me for mentioning his soulmates Doug Martin and Donnie Coutts, but not himself. It was a genuine oversight and I promised him, equally joking but serious, that he would definitely get a mention in the next book. I didn't know if there would even be a next book, never mind its subject matter.

The *Courier*, in a nice obituary, described him as a well-known singer on the Dundee pub music scene but Gerry was much more than this. He delighted punters in Dundee pubs and clubs for decades, but his powerful, high tenor voice (think Marvin Gaye) was of international quality and, when asked by the Average White Band star Hamish Stuart what his plans were, he apparently answered, 'Put it this way, I'm after your job.' His sense of humour was often disarming. I last saw him at Tynecastle when the Dundee fans gave a long, singing ovation to the Bonettis for what they had achieved at Dens in their first season. I'll remember that as a song for Gerry McGrath.

Ivano, Dario . . . Ivano, Dario . . .

Jim Wilkie,
November 2001

ONE

AN UNLIKELY REVOLUTION

'I've never played for a club like this before,' said Dundee FC defender Lee Maddison one day in the year 2000, and football aficionados knew exactly what he was talking about. A property magnate who thought he could buy and close down city rivals Dundee United when the latter were by far the more successful club in the town and their shareholding was in private hands; a lawyer who was subsequently struck off his professional register for financial malpractice and jailed; a Canadian wheeler-dealer who decided that an ice rink and a dog track held the keys to the city's footballing future - then two brothers who, whilst delivering major stadium improvements and success on the park, were briefly courted by the business associate of a notorious Serbian war criminal and driven to sack two managers who had achieved everything that had been asked of them. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, these were Dundee FC's chairmen.

Meanwhile, across the street . . . another chairman, a man who could legitimately claim to have done it all in football management, was torturing himself - and the club's fans - to death. Slowly and, in the manner of Torquemada, with absolute certainty of purpose.

In some ways, I blame myself . . .

When I wrote *Across the Great Divide* in 1984, I was an earnest laddie of 36, an innocent intrigued by the evident historic curiosities of professional football in Dundee. Why were there still two clubs in a moderately sized and economically challenged city? Why did they play across the street from one another? And why was sectarianism not a more prominent factor given the situation in other Scottish cities?

I laid out the facts as I found them in books and newspapers, tempering them with whatever insights had been gained over a 30-year period of playing football, watching the Dundee teams and listening to their exploits on the wireless. The publisher, one of whose fellow directors was Gordon Brown MP, had not dealt with football books previously and when he contrasted his failure to sell any books at the launch with his vanishing drink supply, he began to vent his spleen upon the author (myself). Naturally, he was consumed with remorse (and glee) the following week when special deliveries began to be requested by booksellers the length and breadth of the Murraygate.

His second football book, incidentally, was written by an even more complete literary novice called Alex Ferguson but, by then, the perceived need for intimidation as a publishing tactic had receded.

On the banks of the Tay, however, the pattern for weirdness was set in clay. A copy of *Across the Great Divide* - acclaimed by the *Guardian* and rubbished by the *Sporting Post* - had fallen into the hands of a diminutive millionaire named Angus Cook and, so much did he like what he saw, he decided to buy the company . . . or perhaps both companies.

Hermless

I don't know what type of person wants to write another football book. In fact, a few months before I began this, I

was no longer certain that I wanted even to go to a match in Scotland. In my lifetime Dundee had plummeted from European semi-finals against AC Milan and Leeds to the B&Q Challenge Cup (which they won, but who exactly was B, not to mention his even more mysterious accomplice, Q?); from a League Cup win to League obscurity – and we're talking about the Scottish League here. The club's centenary video was celebrating goals against Airdrie. And all this against a backdrop of great United success.

In the millennium year, however, there was a new and unknown factor: an amazing decision by the new Dundee board to replace a manager – Jocky Scott, talented and loved ex-player with whom 90 per cent of the Dundee support were happy (although his teams were occasionally slow of foot) – with a new Italian regime. Not just an Italian manager you understand, but a player-manager, coach, fitness coach, club co-ordinator, later a goalkeeping coach and physiotherapist, plus a bevy of Italian, Spanish and Argentinian players. In some ways, given the relative size of the club, this was the most radical cultural experiment in the British game to date. Why? Why Dundee? Why must Jocky sleep with the fishes?

Then the first two games were won in marvellous and gifted style, so there I was at Easter Road, sitting a few seats away from middle-aged men I'd been at school with, hoping – 35 years on – for something. What? A glimpse of excellence? Some kind of artistic experience? Amazingly in one sense (but as was now expected), there actually was some art on show that day from Dundee's Caballero and Agathe of Hibs, and that doyen of sports commentators, Bob Crampsey, would remark later in the season that Dundee had reminded Scots that football could indeed be an art form. Were we trying to recapture our youth? Somehow reaffirm our identity?

The first time I went to the new Dens Park (in 1999) I went with my *West Highland Free Press* colleague Dave Scott,

unwavering in his enthusiasm and now a DFC shareholder in spite of a fairly recent stroke. 'Is this your first time in the stadium?' asked a polite steward. Dave and I looked at one another, yon wye.

'No, we've been here before,' I said, 'but it is our first time in this new stand, and I have to pick up tickets.'

'Just round the corner then, sir, and your friend can hang on here.'

Changed days indeed, and greatly for the better.

I went round to the (temporary) ticket office and there was a wee guy in front of me, bending over to speak sideways through the space at the foot of the glass window. Acoustically speaking, this action was not really necessary.

"Scuse me, pal!" the man called, in a louder-than-necessary voice. 'Wid it be OK if eh bought a programme the day but didna go tae the match?'

The official paused for a moment, to consider this untypical request.

'Eh! . . . of coorse,' he said after a moment's hesitation, bringing forward a programme. 'Of coorse . . . one pound fifty, pal.'

'Ah, thank' very much, thank' very much,' said the wee man hurriedly. 'Y' see . . . eh'm a programme collector but . . . eh've got ti go tae a budgie show the day.'

*Hermless . . . hermless
There's never nae bather fae me
Eh ging tae the libr'y, I tak oot a book
And then I go hame for my tea*

Michael Marra

Neither can it be obvious why so many people seem to want to write books about the Dundee although the transformation from juteopolis to 'international centre for life sciences and civic arts' must be one of the most remarkable events of my lifetime. Unfortunately it continues

to happen against a background of poor life expectancy, but the city remains a vibrant place in my view and sometimes it's difficult to remember what it was, even in its relatively recent history.

Footballers can always be recalled, and incidents in the games too but, when you see pictures of the town in the post-war years, it really is another country. The famous photograph of United before their promotion-winning game against Berwick Rangers in 1960, for example - Ronnie Yeats, Denis Gillespie and the rest. These players will always be remembered as they were, but look at the crowd behind them: all men, most wearing caps, on an open terracing which was then still railway sleepers, and with free access for some determined young urchins through the smallholding fence. And why were there often smallholdings beside football grounds? There's one at Easter Road, too (although I believe it's under threat) and Hearts have a city farm near Tynecastle. Dundee also had its fairground - Gussie Park - in this area. Why? It's as though the whole place was some kind of no man's land available for community action and fertility rites.

Good sportsmen, I suppose, were always revered for the 'lift' they could give to the community - the 'I clapped his dug' syndrome - and Dundee certainly needed a good slap in the '50s. Jute was still selling but the bigger mills were beginning to close and, in any case, the factory lifestyle could not be sustained. People were having to work long hours in filthy, noisy conditions for subsistence money and even the clerical jobs harked back to another era. The Verdant Works in Dundee, now a splendid (albeit threatened) heritage centre, gives you an idea of what things were like - folk standing at desks, one telephone in the main office, hundreds of people queuing at the gate to run home (or to the pub) as soon as the bumper went. Any relief was welcome.

Another (related) feature of the city at this time, particularly in the streets which led from the docks to the mills, was horses. Carters apparently provided the most reliable transport up cobbled hills and the smell of the jute in the streets (not to mention the ordure) was memorable. In fact, in the '60s, there was a wee stables quite near the Dundee football grounds, in Malcolm Street. The clothing that these men worked in was also unique: bib and braces in better weather but, when it rained, on came the bunnets and long coats which, in time, were stained by the jute and the weather. In many Dundee pubs, this was the fashion in the '50s and '60s before the advent of the Pacamac.

Even sport had not really progressed from Victorian times in many ways. To get to the swimming baths you had to negotiate the wharves and another round of nightmare Dickensian employment opportunities. Many public parks - like Riverside - retained their original Victorian pavilions and sports changing-rooms.

So, post-war Dundee: trams; Ingin' Johnnies and singers in the back greens; the Overgate and Wellgate, curious and marvellous streets; the DPM (Dundee Pasteurised Milk), a minimalist cafe; Draffens, a genteel department store; La Scala, an ageing 'opera house'; Fintry, an avenue of hope; the Continental and Chalet, alternative dance venues with a whiff of extra-marital affairs; and Broughty Ferry itself, a holiday resort.

Into this scenario, in 1959, walked Bob Shankly. Actually, it might have been Bill Shankly who, apparently, also made a late application for the Dundee job - and what the legendary Bill might have achieved at Dens boggles the mind. Or does it? Could anyone have surpassed Bob Shankly's achievements at a provincial Scottish club?

At the time I was about 11 years old and going to Dens and Tannadice, week about. Dundee FC had, I suppose, become my team partly because my father favoured them and partly because they were the bigger, First Division side,

but I always had a soft spot for United as well and, because the colours were quite similar, I wore the Dundee scarf to both grounds.

With rock'n'roll now awakening something inside me, I had noticed that not only could you hear Little Richard to best advantage at the Gussie Park carnivals (i.e. very loudly), but if you went to Tannadice early for some reason, you heard American country music that you didn't hear elsewhere - Hank Williams, Johnny Duncan and the like. There were also some memorable football experiences there: George Eastham playing like Maradona for Newcastle United in a friendly; Denis Gillespie and John White taking United apart in an Alloa team managed by Jerry Kerr; and the United characters themselves - Johnny Coyle, Jimmy Briggs, Walter Carlyle, Rolando Ugolini. Then there was the ground - the pavilion with one household bath and one phone where you waited for results at the end of the match; the wooden stand - 'every time the ba' hut the roof ye got covered wi' forky tailies!'; and the houses in the Sandeman Street estate that had an uninterrupted view of the United match.

By 1960, however, another factor had entered the equation: United won the first derby match since their promotion and were making clear their intentions to rival their neighbours on an ongoing basis. For my part, it meant that a choice had to be made and I decided upon the Dark Blues. The club appeared to have 'more' of a history, but I would pay for this.

In the late 1940s and early '50s, Dundee Football Club had ambitions to be the third force in Scottish football. Under the flamboyant management of George Anderson and chairmanship of James Gellatly, they retained the international outlook of wartime and brought a Scottish inside-forward named Bobby Flavell back from Bogota in Colombia, signed a Canadian, a Dane, various Englishmen and two South Africans and blended them with some young

Scots talent like Doug Cowie, George Hill and Tommy Gallacher (son of Patsy and uncle of Kevin). Anderson then beat Rangers to sign the legendary Billy Steel from Derby for a UK record fee of £17,500 in 1950, thereby putting thousands on the home 'gates', and went on to win the League Cup twice (1951-52 and 1952-53) and reach a Scottish Cup final (1952). Steel only lasted a few seasons but was, in effect, the Claudio Caniggia of the side, enjoying great celebrity and the occasional commercial sponsorship. BILLY STEEL SAYS 'SMOKE CRAVEN A was a cardboard sign that many Dundee children saw on the shop counter when they handed over their mum's ration book. There was also the occasional note of scandal with stories of the Scotland cap turning up still drunk on a Saturday morning, only to be put in a shower before going out to play a blinder. Changed days?

Dundee continued to attract young talent with Doug Cowie the vital link. A stylish footballer who was comfortable anywhere in the half-back line, he acted as mentor to the next generation which included Jim Chalmers, George O'Hara, Jimmy Gabriel and Bill Brown. The trend continued when Willie Thornton became manager and the ex-Ranger seemed to have a particularly good eye for young players. He signed Pat Liney, Alex Hamilton, Bobby Cox, Ian Ure, Andy Penman, Alan Cousin, Alan Gilzean and Hugh Robertson and, when he moved on - for family reasons, to Partick Thistle - the attraction of such a club to a man like Shankly who, himself, had made a good footballing reputation with a quality Third Lanark side, would have been fairly strong.

Shankly proceeded to take Dundee FC to their first (and only) League title (1961-62) and European Cup semi-final (1963) with a team which (again) Bob Crampsey has described as the most classical footballing side he ever saw in the Scottish club game. So that's why we were all at

Easter Road. And it's why Hibs and Hearts retain a healthy support; why Aberdeen and Dundee United fans can never lose faith completely; and why Kilmarnock and Dunfermline fans soldier on in expectation. Because their football, at its best, represents their place, their art, their culture - in other words, themselves. Like first love, when you see beauty in the game of football in your home town, it somehow becomes part of you. You sort of belong to one another and the yearning appears to remain with you for the rest of your life.

Into every love affair, however, a little rain must fall.

'I found true love, weren't worth me waiting for . . .'

'True Love Blues' (Jimmy Reid)

TWO

THE 1950S

Doug Cowie

George Anderson . . . wanted you to get the ball down and play football, and Dundee's always been known for being a good footballing team.

En route to meeting Doug Cowie, I was imagining him as a fairly elderly gentleman – and so he is, now 75 years old – but the fit and lean physique which greets me on the doorstep takes me by surprise and completely belies this age. What's more, it must be in the genes, as he tells me that his son, Doug Jnr, is still occasionally turning out for one of the Edinburgh Spartans teams, at the age of 50!

It may seem strange to begin this book with a player who was born in the 1920s and then move on to three others – Alan Cousin, Bobby Cox and Craig Brown – who plied their trade in the '60s. What relevance can this possibly have to an international team of highly paid players in the twenty-first century? Well, I'm sure the fans don't need an explanation but, for the more casual reader, I think it is important to understand something of the tradition of Dundee FC: its players, administrators and fans, two of whom – Peter and Jimmy Marr – have gone on to lead the club in this exciting new era, risking substantial funds, built up over years of business activity, in order to back a lifetime's ambition. Cowie was the lynchpin of the 1950s