When Bella Union, the label founded by ex-Cocteau Twins Robin Guthrie and Simon Raymonde, held a showcase gig at Kilburn's excellent Luminaire on a freezing Monday evening late in February, Wears The Trousers dispatched her trusty aides Pete Morrow and Clare Byrne to meet and greet Sara Lov and Dustin O’Halloran of Dévics (that's dee-vix).

Reduced to a two-piece on stage (“we lost them in a freak van fire”), Sara flirted from glockenspiel to piano to bass while Dustin marshalled an impressive collection of pedals, an FX unit and a sequencer. Simon Raymonde made a welcome appearance to give bass support for Lie To Me and Glenn Moule of Australian cabaret metal act Howling Bells provided mighty drums (not to mention a five-star, ten-gallon hat) on Red Morning and Secret Message To You. What impressed most though was the emotion, scale and texture of the songs, something that many production-heavy bands are incapable of creating in the live environment. That the Dévics could pick up and play tracks of such characteristic tone and depth was all the more striking given the minimal EP-sized duration of the set.

We managed to snag Sara and Dustin for a chat before the gig...

Congratulations on the new album, Push The Heart, we’ve been enjoying it a lot.

Sara: Thank you.

How did you find recording in LA compared with making your last album [2003’s The Stars At Saint Andrea] in Italy?

S: I know they’ve been saying that a lot but we actually did record a lot of it in Italy too. About half and half. We kind of bring our tapes back and forth. We did a lot of our own recording.

What prompted the move back to LA?

Dustin: For the last record, we did almost the whole thing in a farmhouse. It was our first time recording ourselves and Simon lent us a bunch of equipment, it was a sort of Frankenstein studio event. It was a good experience but we wanted to have more of a hand in the recording process, meaning mixing in LA.

S: Dustin hasn’t really moved back from Italy. I’m back and forth, more in LA.

Do you think that Italy and California influence your music differently?

S: I think wherever you are when you’re creating something has an effect. It’s not so much the culture that affects me, it’s more being away from the city, being isolated; those kind of things that affect the music more than being submerged in a different culture. To not be able to see your friends, your family, to not be able to see your friends’ bands in LA, that really affects the way you write. When you only have what you’re playing, what you’re listening to, it’s a different experience.

You’ve been a band for about a decade now. How do you think you’ve developed?

D: It’s a weird question to answer because we’ve been in this band for so long and making this music that when I listen to our early stuff I feel like ‘oh my God, I was so young,’ everything was so different. We’ve just grown as people and everything’s changed, and our music is always changing and evolving — I think we’re always trying to do something new that might stimulate us that maybe we haven’t tried before. That doesn’t mean that we don’t revisit certain kinda things that we do.

Do you have any idea where you’re going to go from here?

D: Every record we’ve ever done has been a complete blind journey, because we never have money… we never know how we’re going to be able to afford to record it <laughs>. Every time we’ve been writing or recording, our living circumstances change. Just for instance, for The Stars At Saint Andrea, we were both living in Italy and we had this place where we were writing the record. I’d be writing between the hours of 10 at night and 5 in the morning. And this record was different because I was writing a lot of music by myself, sending Sara tapes... she was working on stuff and then she came out here and we worked really hard for about 4 months, just on lyrics, and I set her up with a computer and she did it by herself.

S: Yeah, I recorded all my own vocals — a first for me — and I wrote as I recorded a lot of it and kind of experimented a little. That was pretty fun ‘cos nobody was around and I could try anything and not feel embarrassed and then if I did something bad I could erase it <laughs>. Always important.

D: I think technology had more of a hand in helping us finish the songs. I think the idea to come back to LA was that I wanted to bring some of the tracks I had, maybe use loops or whatever, let someone really help in finishing the songs. I think that was the first record we did more as a duo and I wanted to see how it would be writ-
ing as a duet and then bringing more of a band feel into it. So, it’s all an experiment really, just to see what comes next.

S: I think we’ve learned that, for us, it’s great to just take the resources we have and not have to spend money and just try to record ourselves. For our very early records we would do this huge production, get a studio and spend so much of our money. It’s very stressful because you know you just have this month and you have to do all of it. It’s like “I have to do these vocals in two hours, because this is so expensive being here” and to record it yourself at your leisure is a whole different world because there’s no stress.

Have you become a bit of a perfectionist?
S: Yeah, but I like to try to capture first takes. I like it to not be too processed.
D: I try to do that too. Maybe it’s a product of me playing piano but I like to try to capture a whole take from beginning to end, if I can. I love old records and that’s how they did it. To me, good musicianship is how records were made in the Sixties. They weren’t tuning people’s voices with computers.

Have you played many shows with the new material yet?
D: Not really, we just did four shows in LA just with this stuff.
S: But way before the record was done. We just did a little press tour, a promo in Italy, and now this one here and tonight we’re just playing as a duo, which is very different. Normally we play with five people and it’s a very full sound. It’s hard for us to play without all of that but we try to make it work. We’d like to bring the band, it’s just very expensive.

Are you touring properly later in the year?
D: We’re going to do some shows in Europe — Italy and Switzerland at the end of March. I don’t know if the UK is going to be a part of that right now. We might wait until a little bit later.

It’s so much more expensive in the UK than the rest of Europe!
D: It’s the first time we’ve been here and we spent about £150 in like a day!

On a bag of chips and a four-pack...
D: <laughs> Right. I mean, Italy has gotten a lot more expensive since the Euro but we’re used to spending in US dollars so it’s just whoooosh!

Presumably because you don’t fit into a convenient pigeonhole, you get compared to a vast and diverse list of other bands. We’ve got here from Mojave 3 to Leonard Cohen to early 70s Pink Floyd to Bertolt Brecht to Fiona Apple… one Amazon reviewer listed you as “cinematic torchcore and punk sea shanties”.
D: <laughs> I guess from a label or press standpoint that’s a bad thing, but I always think that’s good. There are two different types of music: timeless music and music that’s of the moment. Both of them are valid, because music that’s of the moment has spontaneity but, you know, it passes. I always wanted to be in the first category because that’s the music I love. Like Histoire De Melody Nelson by Serge Gainsbourg. That’s probably one of my top five. S: Yeah, me too.
D: Not just sonically, but also musically — I think the arrangements on that record are amazing. And more in that vein really.

Who has really impressed you recently?
S: Deerhoof. And Eason.
D: Múm, I really really like.
S: I go through so much new music, it’s hard to name names because I know I’m going to forget a bunch of them.
D: I love a lot of classical music. I try to get some of the arrangements, the chordal voicing, that sort of thing, I like it when there’s an influence of that in the music. People like Serge Gainsbourg and Múm do that. And I think that does twist it a bit, because rock music can be formulaic and get a bit blocky. Jazz music can open things up, but there are also parameters within jazz. Classical gets even more open. I like that sense of space.

You can hear that in the music. Actually, the typewriter on Secret Message to You, made me think of Múm, playing around with toy instruments.
D: Yeah, where you’ve got a melody and twisting it a bit by not just working in root melodies and fifths, but then really bending it a little bit.
S: Also Sufjan Stevens and Laura Veirs and a lot of songwriter kinda people I like a lot. And actually this new My Latest Novel on Bella Union, that just came out.
D: Actually, some of the records that I really love are on Bella Union, which is totally coincidental.

Not paid to say that at all.
D: No no <laughs>… being totally objective, there are things that I like and things that I don’t. I was really pleased, the Explosions In The Sky record is beautiful and it’s nice to be a family.
S: I love The Arcade Fire. And the Bell Orchestre album.
D: The Arcade Fire have gotten loads of great press and there are so few cases when you can say that it’s truly deserved. I saw them at the Hollywood Bowl opening for David Byrne and I have to say it was one of the best shows I’ve seen for years. Seeing a band at a point when you know they’re arriving, and they’re such great musicians and they love what they do. It was beautiful to see and it was one of those things that kind of reinvigorates your faith in music. This is what it’s about, it’s about that moment when you get that exchange, it’s not about anything else.

Sufjan Stevens played a similar show to that here recently. He’s played a bunch of times over the past few years and nobody knew who he was, just in tiny places with a banjo, and then overnight everybody knows who he is and he plays these amazing shows with a full orchestra.
D: I think there are bands that do get to grow, if you get isolated. I mean, Sufjan Stevens is from New York, and maybe because nobody paid any attention to him for a while, it allows you to grow in a good way. Being from LA we see so many new bands that start off and their first show they’re already thinking there’s gonna be a record guy there and they haven’t even been a band for three months. At that point it’s like what is it really about, you know, is it about getting a record deal or about making music? And those bands, sometimes they last a year and then break-up.
S: Sometimes they get signed and break up right after that. Sometimes they’re signed and the label pressure makes them break up...
D: We didn’t move to LA to become a band like a lot of people do, we just grew up there. You have a certain arc of emotions where you’re working and you see a lot of other people doing all the things they want and that’s frustrating. But then you come full circle and you realise that the only thing that’s important is being by yourself or at the live show where it’s just the music. All of that other stuff is just temporary. It’s not gonna last for 90% of the people. You’ve just got to enjoy those moments.