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WILD BEASTS (UK)

Boy King

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"On the last day of making *Boy King* I had a minor breakdown in knowing what part of myself I was revealing. It's a bit ugly, a bit grubby, arrogant," says Hayden Thorpe, reflecting on the recording of Wild Beasts' fifth album, their most naked and direct to date and a marked change from the optimistic aesthetics of 2014's *Present Tense*. If that album found Thorpe, Tom Fleming, Ben Little and Chris Talbot in reflective mood, absorbing a fascination with online culture and electronic music, *Boy King* has them, as Fleming puts it, "back to being pissed off". Wild Beasts' ever-present knack for sensual melody via Thorpe and Fleming's duetting vocals, Little's sinuous guitar groove and Talbot's potent rhythm section carries in *Boy King* an aggressive, snarling and priapic beast that delves into the darker side of masculinity and Thorpe's own psyche. As Hayden himself says, "After five records there had to be an element of 'what the fuck?'". Wild Beasts decided to find their way into the follow-up to *Present Tense* with a complete change in how they approached their craft. This moment of realisation that they needed to change how they wrote songs was, says Thorpe, hugely liberating: "The only thing you can do from that point onwards is turn your vehicle into traffic and play chicken with yourself, and do all the things you said you'd never do."

This was the pressure that Wild Beasts put themselves under when they began sessions writing from nine to five in their London studio. Thorpe says that he had a combination of the soulful pop of Justin Timberlake and industrial grit of Nine Inch Nails as touchstones as to where he wanted the record to go, an eclectic ambition that ultimately ended being pushed even further by a friendly rivalry between he and Fleming that developed during writing. "He arrived at the rehearsal room early on with a white Jackson guitar and started shredding", as Thorpe puts it, "over what I'd always intended to be a soul album."

Far from being problematic, however, this creative friction proved key to unleashing the unique pop sensibility of *Boy King* - Fleming's more visceral experimentation unlocking new dimensions in Thorpe's own writing as the sessions went on. "I began to hear a lot more aggression in what he was bringing - a lot more forward-facing, less pensive stuff," Fleming explains. "Every time I did something ridiculous, everyone responded well, which enabled us all to push everything

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further and have more fun with it. Everything I thought was guilty came across really well in the rehearsal room".

After spending a whole year finessing this new found impetus in East London, the band emerged with a collection of songs ready to take to Dallas and producer John Congleton. "We wanted to find the most insensitive way of finishing it, the most crude, hack-handed," as Thorpe explains. "It had to be guttural, the absolute opposite of *Present Tense* - that was the only way of keeping it alive".

Both Thorpe and Fleming credit that trip to Dallas with teasing out the raw power of *Boy King*. In the studio, the band kept up the intensity of the office hour routine they'd employed during writing sessions and, they say, responded well to Congleton's sober discipline. "He made us get in there, get on and do it," Fleming says. "English politeness never featured."

"John just said 'come with an open heart and an open mind'," enthuses Thorpe. "Just asking that simple thing, among all the noise and the superstition of making a record, was for me quite profound. I thought 'OK, this is a very human experience', and it's a human record in that sense. It's a bit sloppy, it's a bit glitchy, it's a bit unkept. That for me is what's so heartening about it - we've allowed the ugliness to show."

The raw pop of *Boy King's* songs are the perfect foil to Thorpe's libidinous lyricism: "it became apparent that that guitar almost became the character within the songs, that phallic character, the all-conquering male," he says. "I'm letting my inner Byron fully out, I thought I'd tucked him away, but he came screaming back like the Incredible Hulk."

The flawed and unsettled nature of the male condition has obsessed and imbued Wild Beasts since their earliest days. Yet on *Boy King* it finds this obsession realised with a bracing honesty. Fleming and Thorpe feel this is rather timely in an age where male identity seems to be in crisis. "There's a lot of 'he protests too much' you stick your chest out and think what a big dick you've got, but really? Do you believe that?" Fleming says, admitting that, initially, they mocked those men... "but then we realised we were that, that we're part of the joke".

Thorpe describes *Boy King* as "a record for the Tinder generation" where everyone has a license to have a few sexual identities for reality (IRL), or online. Yet it's also a time when perhaps some of the more primitive urges that he's allowed out on the album are suppressed and find their outlet in things like... shopping. Get My Bang for instance, was inspired by the orgy of commercialism that happens every Black Friday. "It's all about the horrific lengths you have to go to to get gratification in today's society where we can't live out these Byronic characters, so we have to go shopping and fight each other over TVs to satisfy the id, that primal part - that's how people get off."

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How few groups could manage to make a record so intense that, at times, sounds so sweet. Here lies Boy Kings' greatest success. '2BU' sees a Fleming vocal, drum machine and a glittering synth chorus reminiscent of David Sylvian's Japan rising together in yearning over, contrastingly, some of the darkest lyrics on the record, about being "the kind of guy who wants to watch the world burn." For all the leering, gimlet-eyed funk rock of 'Tough Guy', 'Big Cat' and 'Get My Bang' and lyrics that slide between prowling aggression and interior darkness, there are glorious, gorgeous moments. So 'Celestial Creatures' powers forward with an engine fueled as if by amphetamines, a celebration of the communal powers of the dancefloor, and marks one of the finest tracks Wild Beasts have yet written.

It all ends, as Wild Beasts albums are wont to do, with a stripped back moment of reflection that ties the rest of the record together, and provides a moment of quiet acceptance. So it is with the processed vocals of the quietly elegiac Dreamliner. "That's the point the inner Byron realizes his own vulnerability, and becomes a boy again", explains Thorpe. It's a beautiful end to yet another incomparable Wild Beasts record, a visceral, sensual and jolting body of work that acts as a remarkable soundtrack to the early 21st century male malaise. Or as Thorpe puts it: "I think Boy King is an apocalyptic record. It's about swimming in the abyss. When you think about sex, you've got to think about death, they're one and the same."

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