

MATTHEW E. WHITE (USA)

«Fresh Blood» (Domino Records, Release: 06.03.2015)



Fresh Blood is a bracing, beguiling record and a bold advance for Matthew E. White. Opener «Take Care My Baby» is his step-into-the-light moment, a sophisticated but instantly winning soul number where love becomes a panacea for woe. That enthusiasm crosses over for «Fruit Trees», a smiling, seductive number where White – his voice traced and teased by horns, strings and harmonies – begs for a paramour to «let me sleep in your tent tonight». Sometimes these situations don't go well, though, which White confesses during «Feeling Good is Good Enough». It's a breakup song in ecstatic pursuit of temporary carnal relief.

On Dec. 24, 2013, Matthew E. White could not fall asleep in his childhood bedroom. The Richmond singer, bandleader and modern soul visionary had returned to his parents' home in Virginia Beach for the holidays. During the previous 18 months, he'd toured Europe and America extensively, played Primavera and Glastonbury, performed at The Hollywood Bowl and the Sydney Opera House, and even staged a live rendition of his surprise-hit debut, *Big Inner*, with a band of 30 members. *Big Inner* earned five stars in *The Guardian* and a spot on its year-end list, plus those of Pitchfork, eMusic and Consequence of Sound. But White hadn't rested or seen his family very much. At last, he was excited to do both.

The insomnia, though, didn't stem from childlike anticipation of early-morning presents. Actually, White hurt too much to sleep. Not long after he arrived in Virginia Beach, he developed a sudden case of shingles, the stresses of the last year-and-a-half rendering themselves in painful physical form. So while his parents visited his grandmother and his sister celebrated with her own family just a few blocks away, White spent Christmas Eve alone in his childhood double bed.

But that was OK, as the break gave him the chance to consider the bizarre turns his life had taken – that is, how he went from making a solo record by accident to embracing a solo career so busy it had made him sick.

«For the first time, I remember thinking, 'What just happened?」 he says, laughing long after the shingles have passed. «I thought about all the places I went, the people I played to, the people who cared about my record and felt moved by it. That was the craziest year of my life by miles and miles – and the hardest and the most exciting, too.»

To backtrack, briefly: In 2009, White and a cadre of friends developed the idea of Spacebomb Records, an old-fashioned label and production house meant to turn the tunes of songwriters they liked into grandiose, graceful statements. They had in-house strings and horns and a choir at their behest, too. Collectively, the musicians possessed a wide, working knowledge that could pivot from the gusto of New Orleans to the verve of Detroit, from tube-amp rock to hi-fi pop. Sure, people like to talk about White's past with jazz or his love of classic American songcraft. It's telling, however, that as a high school student, he interned at Master Sound, the hometown studio that Pharrell Williams eventually turned into the epicenter of his empire.

To demonstrate the Spacebomb ideal, White and his wide cast recorded a few songs he'd pieced together, hoping mostly to show other songwriters how the system would work. But those cuts became *Big Inner*, the record that *Uncut* termed «one of the great albums of modern Americana» and caused *Paste* to proclaim that White was one of music's «best new bands.» Tours, interviews, photo shoots and, well, the shingles followed.

While White spent Christmas Eve considering what *had* happened, he already knew what was going to happen next: When the holidays ended, he would begin turning the bits and bobs of song ideas he'd collected on tour into his second album, bolstered by the validation of welcome he'd found in the wider world.

If the first album had been serendipity, every step of this one was to be deliberate, from his co-writing sessions with longtime friend and former bandmate Andy Jenkins to his steady arrangement brainstorming with the trusted Spacebomb house band – bassist Cameron Ralston, drummer Pinson Chanselle and guitarist Trey Pollard, who co-produced the subsequent recording sessions with White. There were timelines and deadlines, detailed discussions about who would mix the music (New York staple Patrick Dillett) and the many stories the songs would share. The result is the audacious, confident and masterful *Fresh Blood*, a record that feels like the brilliant bloom to *Big Inner's* striking bud.

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And while it's got nothing to do with love, lust or leaving, the sassy «Rock & Roll is Cold» radiates the aplomb of an artist who has stumbled into success and taken charge of the circumstances. White's having fun, trading lines with backup singers and saxophones alike, teasing components of the gospel, soul and rock form that shape the very backbone of the music he makes. This is White's party, and he's a most welcoming host.

That same spirit presides during the set of more solemn and pointed songs that serve as *Fresh Blood's* core. For White, one lesson of *Big Inner* and the tours that followed was that he wanted to be able to believe in his songs every night, to know that the words he sang were more than vehicles for memorable melodies.

«I didn't like singing 'Steady Pace' every night. It was too light. It didn't age well for me», he says. «My peers and I sometimes have a lack of concern and awareness for the world around us – culturally, politically, socially. We are in danger of being lulled to sleep by our culture's excess. I'm not writing political songs yet, but I've tried to at least write songs that have to do with the variety and reality of our lives.»

And so, at the record's center, White delivers a trilogy of beautiful reflections on the world as he sees it. An agitated but elegant excoriation of sexual abuse in the church, «Holy Moly» rages like a missing midpoint between Neil Young's *Harvest* and *Tonight's the Night*. «Tranquility» meditates on the death of Philip Seymour Hoffman, a consummate artist whose dual force and frailty has long resonated with White. And in «Circle 'Round The Sun», a look at the suicide of a dear friend's mother, White finds one of the most exquisite moments of balance in his entire career. It is a love song written from the perspective of the recently departed, calmly exploring a tumult of conflicting loyalties – to Jesus, to family, to life, to death.

«Wading in the water, Lord, keep my son and daughter», White sings, at once gentle and resolved over steady and soft piano and drums. «Put your arms around me, Jesus, tonight». At the risk of heresy, *Fresh Blood* feels as comfortable and fraught as those lines and that song. Simultaneously recognizing the trouble and delight that life can bring, these 10 numbers are guides for times of joy, agony and the middle distance where we most often linger. After only two albums, Matthew E. White feels now like an old friend who has seen what we've seen, heard our stories and done his best to make a record that gives them necessary gravity. That way, when we lay awake at night considering our own pain or worry, we've got new anthems to keep us company.