

## 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.

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.

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. 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.

