

alt-J

Before we consider the eight-track, 40-minute, perfectly poised, symmetrically adroit, boldly inventive brilliance of *RELAXER*, the third album by alt-J, consider this...

A Mercury prize and an Ivor Novello win with their debut. A Madison Square Garden sell-out and a Latitude headline with their second. Number One in the UK, Number Four in the US; three Brit nominations here, a Grammy nomination there. Three years of world touring that have forged a live reputation as fierce as the trio are tall (that is, very).

Quietly, resolutely, impressively, singularly, alt-J have become one of the biggest British bands of whatever it is we're calling the 21st century's second decade (the "Teenies"? Ugh, no thanks). Art-electro, math-folk, hymnal-rock, call it what you will – none of it's wholly wrong, all of it is somehow right – but the music made by Joe Newman (singer/guitarist), Gus Unger-Hamilton (keyboards/vocals) and Thom Green (drums/electronics) is the muscular sound of cutting edge innovation pumped by a melodically bleeding heart. Ten years after forming at Leeds University, alt-J are a post-guitar group for the new-pop generation. And as audiences all over the world know, when they get going, they rock hard.

Gentlemen, your highlights of the 16-month tour in support of 2014's *This Is All Yours*, the follow-up to 2012's *An Awesome Wave*?

Newman: "Israel. We didn't know we were big in Israel. What had happened was, after military service, young Israelis are encouraged to go on a sort of self-finding mission, to countries that will let them in. Often that's South American countries, and a lot of these kids end up at this one hostel in Brazil. And apparently *An Awesome Wave* was played around the clock, exclusively, at this hostel. So as these kids were finding themselves and seeing the wider world, they had us as a soundtrack. They were glued to our album as an important part of their freedom. And once they got back to Israel, seemingly everyone knew us. So when we went there we had to double the shows. We played to 24,000 people in two days."

Green: "Madison Square Garden. I'd heard of the place, but that was about it. Most of the hype was coming from other people. I knew we'd sold it out but I didn't know what that meant. We'd obviously started out playing a small venue in New York and worked our way up quite quickly. So walking out in front of all those people was incredible. And by that time we'd been playing a lot, so the light show was good and big, we had great sound engineer, and we were very in tune with each other live. And luckily the songs carried in that atmosphere. I'm still amazed to think we sold out Madison Square Garden, even more so than the O2."

Unger-Hamilton: "India. We went there twice. The first time, we got there and it's the most famous I've ever felt in my life! We'd go to parties and people were crowding around us. I thought, 'wow, this is how far music has taken us...' When you start a band you think, 'it'd be great to play Brixton Academy.' You don't ever think you're going to be playing to 10,000 people in India."

In December 2015, alt-J finally made it home. They had gone straight from touring *An Awesome Wave* into writing and recording *This Is All Yours*, then straight into touring that. It was time for a rest and a reboot.

“There weren’t any fallings out,” clarifies Newman. “It was just three very close friends who had just spent a lot of time on the road who needed to go somewhere where it wasn’t about music or touring or capitalising on the demand.”

So they all went home to London. Newman watched a million films. Green released a solo album, *High Anxiety* (under the name Thom Sonny Green), 21 tracks of glittery, glitchy instrumental electronics. Unger-Hamilton became involved in a pop-up restaurant (it recently popped-down, but only in anticipation of finding a permanent Hackney home).

Then, late last summer, they decided it was time to get back in the saddle. So they did what a now-globally-successful band who’d made two albums in low-key London studios with one producer would obviously do: they didn’t change a thing.

It’s a mark of alt-J’s confidence and sense of musical self that they didn’t need to go the “traditional” third-album route (i.e. a year bouncing around the world’s most expensive studios, wrestling with writers’ block and newfound ayahuasca habits, with production by Mr Hotshot Hitmaker). They again bunkered in London, spending the latter portion of 2016 in a no-frills rehearsal space in Stoke Newington. Then they re-connected with producer Charlie Andrew. He is, the threesome avow, like the fourth member of alt-J.

“As much as there’s our chemistry,” notes Newman, “it’s about Charlie’s hard work as well.” Between the end of last year and the beginning of February this year, the foursome moved between east London’s Strongroom, Brixton’s Iguana Studio (Andrew’s home base), north London’s The Church (owned by Paul Epworth) and history’s Abbey Road. The song ideas, mostly already worked out in the rehearsal space, flowed.

An early standout was Hit Me Like That Snare. Now it sounds like The Stooges produced by James Murphy. But originally, admits Newman, the references was very different.

“It started with a riff that I was playing around with a year before. But I’d kinda left it because it sounded too much like Decks Dark on A Moon Shaped Pool. But then I started playing it with really heavy distortion and we recorded it as a jam.”

Talking of distortion, Newman’s voice – no stranger to a theatrical curveball – has never felt more unhinged than on ...Snare, the frontman oozing a nasal punk whine. The work of studio jiggery-pokery?

“No, I just pulled a lot of faces! I was very much out of my comfort zone and I went over the top into the realm of silly.”

Lyricaly, too, he reached far, linking a near-death experience on a motorway (“we aquaplaned in the car and I shouted out ‘fuck my life in half!’, which I thought was a great phrase for a song”), sex parties in sex hotels (“we didn’t visit any on tour,” is their line and they’re sticking to it) and a post-Brexit frustration that the liberal world was going to hell in a handcart.

Plus, the bleeping out of a single word: f***ing. That is, fisting.

“It’s so arbitrary, that bleeping,” Unger-Hamilton notes cheerfully. For alt-J, the devil is in the f*** detail.

As much is evident in the gripping Deadcrush, currently Green’s favourite. Is it Kanye West gone gothic? Maybe. “It’s not hip hop,” the band’s backstop producer clarifies, “but the beats are all electronic, there’s a heavy sample of a shaker, and a droney synth undercurrent.”

“And,” adds Unger-Hamilton, “there’s Joe singing with a Bee Gees falsetto on the chorus.”

“I am wondering if I’ll be able to maintain that on a year-long world tour,” frowns the frontman. In light(er) counterpoint is the delicate unfurling of 3WW, the opening song and the first track to be released from *RELAXER*. It begins with Unger-Hamilton, on vocals, embarking on a Chaucer-meets-Nick Drake (pre)amble: “There was a wayward lad stepped out one morning...”

From there, a meandering, hypnotic exploration of the “three worn words” referred to by the title: I love you. This means field-recordings (a campfire crackling, water splashing) and the line “the girls from the pool say hi” – spoken by the threesome’s girlfriends, delivered from an actual swimming pool. Talk about Method recording.

“The girls from the pool say hi’ is a note left from the girls,” says Newman by way of explaining 3WW’s thought-through narrative thrust, “and having them say that – in the pool – is a deeper way of actually making you feel like you’re in the moment.”

It’s about immersion, something these thrill-seeking sonic architects accomplish with practised, easygoing ease. You can hear it In Cold Blood, which builds to a thrilling, brassy, bleepy, shouty climax. You can hear it, too, in the spectral Last Year, the calendrical diary of a dying relationship, which features accompaniment from Marika Hackman (she also sang on *This Is All Yours*).

You want to dive deeper? alt-J will take you there, on House Of The Rising Sun. Characteristically, it’s more than “just” a cover, in the same way that the appearance of Miley Cyrus singing “I’m a female rebel” on the last album’s Hunger Of The Pine was more than “just” a sample. Rather the band, with scholarly intent, went back to the core of the song, stripping the varnish from The Animals’ version and finding the woody grain in Woody Guthrie’s version of the lyrics.

Then they added 20 classical guitarists, playing all at once, recorded over two intense hours at The Church. “Twenty hand movements, 20 squeaks on strings,” states Newman of their six-string symphony, “that gives a really odd, percussive almost subliminal feel.”

Finally, ultimately, epically, comes Pleader, the album’s closing song. alt-J see it as a foundational song for *RELAXER*. Live, it promises to take the roof off at all the festival spots the trio have lined up this summer (one of them rather, shall we say, iconic). It’s one of six songs on the album to feature a 30-piece string section, recorded at Abbey Road. But that’s not even the half of its majesty.

Pleader takes lyrical cues from Richard Llewellyn’s classic 1939 novel *How Green Was My Valley*, and vocal drama from the massed voices of the boys of Ely Cathedral, recorded in situ with accompaniment from the building’s mighty organ. As a former chorister at the cathedral, Unger-Hamilton claims that the band secured “a sweet discount – we paid the boys a Victorian wage,” he says, suppressing a cackle.

Such (possibly made-up) callous abandon is at odds with what Q has described as the song’s “mighty ecclesiastical swell”, which is a lovely way of describing Pleader’s heartfelt, heavenly glory. “It’s almost a secular piece of religious music,” offers Unger-Hamilton.

“For me the song is very hymnal,” adds Newman. “And the book is just beautifully written. You could extract so many visual ideas just from one sentence, so I just collected loads of them and then filtered through an alt-J world.”

This is *RELAXER*: eight tracks, 40 minutes, focused and concise, both out-there and in-here. As Unger-Hamilton acknowledges: “We’ve always liked our music to be headphone music, that takes you on a bit of a journey. This album goes one step further, a journey into your own mind. It’s quite trippy – even though none of us are trippers,” he insists.

The album title, Green adds, felt apposite. “*RELAXER* was originally the name of a track I made last year, and then it was in the original lyrics for Deadcrush. And after that, it just seemed to fit the album overall – and we do always want our albums to be listened to as a single piece of music.” Still, it wasn’t always that concise, or that straightforward.

“At one point I was really pushing for Space Whales Nature’s Starships,” says Newman. “Which I still think is a great title.”

There’s an uncomfortable silence before Unger-Hamilton pipes up.

“That doesn’t hashtag so well,” he observes, correctly.