

“I was worried that some of the songs would be irrelevant by the time the record came out,” says Maximo Park frontman Paul Smith. “Unfortunately, that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

As you’ve probably noticed, we have entered one of those unfortunate periods in history when political upheavals are so vast and grim that they become unavoidable. When cruelty and intolerance are on the rise, works of art that meet them head on with an alternative vision are more than valuable — they’re necessary. Risk to Exist, Maximo Park’s sixth album, is a collection of irresistible pop songs about anger, hope, resistance and, above all, empathy — a knockout fusion of music and message from a band on extraordinary form.

Maximo Park began writing Risk to Exist back in 2015. Main melodicist Duncan Lloyd, along with Lukas Wooller, provided the band with a host of diverse new arrangements, sweeping from machine gun guitar riffs on 'Risk To Exist', to the House-inspired euphoria of 'Alchemy'. Lloyd compares his musical input on these songs to, “walking between the dance, indie and rock clubs of my youth; the main places to escape and be lifted somewhere else”.

The band’s new direction needed a fresh lyrical approach, too. During a few days in Berlin, one of his favourite cities, Smith worked on a lyric for what became I’ll Be Around, an infectiously charming song about standing together in difficult times. It pointed the way forward. The band had written songs with political implications before — Girls Who Play Guitars from 2007, or the title track of 2012’s The National Health — but now they felt the urge to be more explicit.

“We wanted to say something about the way the world is,” says Smith. “It’s heart-on-sleeve stuff. I don’t like the idea

of preaching but people might feel the same way as some of these songs. It's good to have something to sing along to that has some meaning to it."

When Smith reconvened with his bandmates in Newcastle, they covered a whiteboard with ideas for the album. Phrases like "Rock can be danceable" and "The personal is political." Influences such as Robert Wyatt's heartbreaking Falklands War fable *Shipbuilding* and the sonically ambitious, socially conscious pop of Peter Gabriel's *So*. And the fundamental challenge: "Can we ally our passion for social responsibility with pop songs?"

They answered that question with an emphatic yes. *Risk to Exist* marks a musical progression for the band, with the addition of a horn section and new bassist Paul Rafferty from Hot Club de Paris. "We've mutated in a subtle way," say Smith. "It felt like the right time to allow a bit more space in the arrangements. A lot of our songs are crammed with ideas but with each record you break your own rules. People like Prince and Stevie Wonder are influences on the record in a roundabout way. We wanted the tunes to match the immediacy of the lyrics."

After taking a break for band members to pursue their various solo projects, Maximo Park recorded the album last autumn at Wilco's Chicago studio, The Loft. They chose producer and engineer Tom Schick, known for his work with Parquet Courts and Low as well as Wilco. Through Schick, they approached Low's Mimi Parker to sing backing vocals on five songs. "If you'd have told me when I was listening to Low on my headphones at university that she would be on my record..." Smith marvels. "It was the archetypal dream come true. Her voice adds humanity and warmth."

Every song on *Risk to Exist* combines keen intelligence, emotional conviction and visceral energy. The stirring title

track was prompted by the Foreign Office's shocking decision in 2014 to stop supporting search-and-rescue operations in the Mediterranean because, it claimed, saving lives encouraged illegal migration. "Where's your empathy?" Smith sings. Maximo Park are donating all proceeds from the single to the Migrant Offshore Aid Station, a Malta-based foundation that helps migrants and refugees in peril at sea.

The rampaging Get High (No I Don't) deals with how the likes of Nigel Farage hammer poisonous ideas into the heart of mainstream politics. Make What You Can was written in response to news stories about the effects of austerity on disabled people. "I went to see I, Daniel Blake in the cinema and thought, blimey, this is similar to what I'm saying," says Smith. What Did We Do to You to Deserve This? rails against inequality and phony nostalgia while Make What You Can pits defiance against despair: "You gotta make what you can but the future gets further away."

Smith's literate lyrics look beyond the news to examine present strife via some unexpected sources. The Hero, another song about migration, draws inspiration from Luchino Visconti's 1960 movie Rocco and His Brothers and advises: "Compromise is not a sin but you'd better not make a habit of it." The Reason I Am Here adapts a line from Lorca's poem Landscape of a Pissing Multitude ("We will have to make a journey through the eyes of idiots") and reflects on Smith's own decision to remain in his hometown. "Brexit brought new meaning to that song for me," he says. "There was a lot of talk about leaving the country when Brexit happened or Trump got in but the only way to make your little corner of the world better is to stay there and do whatever you can."

The thread that ties all these songs together is compassion and the importance of human connection so it's only right that it should culminate in Alchemy, a protest that turns

into a love song. "We thought that was the way to end an album like this," says Smith. "The message of the album is that empathy is more important than ever and solidarity is more important than divisiveness."

Risk to Exist teems with memorable lines, from rallying cries to cries for help, but perhaps the one that best sums up this bracing and moving record is one from Work and then Wait: "If you're going to say something, better say it loud." Risk to Exist says it loud in a way that's exhilarating, unignorable and essential.