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BYO Break in: Feels Like 37

They always say that people don't remember what you do or say, they remember how you make them feel. Well the DMA's have got that cliché sorted right out. The music that Johnny Took, Matt Mason and Tom O'Dell make isn't the sort that you listen to and question what the hell is going on; it just feels right somehow, and now we know why: everything they do is with feeling.

When we turn up at number 37, Took's house and the namesake of their second single, Took comes waltzing around the corner with a bottle of red wine in hand, and a knitted sweater on his back. Tuesday afternoon feels cosy and calm. "Wanna come with? I just have to go pick Mason up. He lives across the road, you can literally see his house from my house. He's gone through four phones in the last month."

We make our way, literally across the street and down a dingy alleyway that's somehow a sort of aqua colour, damp, and quiet, away from the busy street out front. Mason is standing on his porch. "I'm meant to go see Leon (their manager) to get a phone. But I guess I don't really need one, it's nice being off the grid. Leon doesn't like it though."

This is how it is with these boys. Nothing seems to be thought through too much, nothing is too difficult. There is a logic and premeditation in the way they operate, but it is coloured with a certain sheen of intuition; whatever feels right is what they do.

Take the video they made for The Plan for example, which features Mason and a whole lot of the infamous white ibis birds found around Sydney.

"Um, well I like that everyone hates them. I have a bunch of ibis jewellery, and a tattoo here, it's pretty nasty," Mason says as he pulls up his sleeve to reveal a bird on his arm. You get the impression that he didn't think any of this through too much, just decided and did it; as though there were no other options considered.

Took comes back into the room, glances at Mason's bare arm before saying, "I'll give you guys the tour." He takes us down a long hallway from the living room passing a very seventies, mission brown kitchen, a bathroom, a stack of some 12 or so guitars and finally to his bedroom at the very end.

"This is where we recorded the EP" he spreads his hands out, gesturing to the equipment scattered across the floor, before sitting down at his computer in the corner. "I'm probably not even supposed to show you this, but hey, sneak preview. We just did this yesterday, so it's really raw. It's a bit different to our other stuff. It doesn't have any vocals on it, just Mason mumbling the lead; probably as raw as it gets really, but the vibe's there."

The song he puts on is one that may or may not end up on their next release. It may be unmixed, but it feels right. It's like a cool beer in the hot summer sun, there's happiness with a bit of a bitter hit folded in there somewhere. This is what the DMA's have come to be known for in the matter of months they have hit the airways; their gritty, raw sound that's not so perfect as has a solid personality. It sounds like a good friend you can rely on.

"I like the raw sound", Took says. "If you're going to be writing poppy music, with all the shmick production you lose the grittiness of it. The fact that it [their music] is kind of dodgy...well not dodgy, but raw you know? Some of those amps are pretty old so they give it that texture too."

Having started making music together some three years ago, very little has changed in the way the DMAs approach their production, despite now being signed to one of the country's best indie labels (I OH YOU) and music management companies (Falcona).

"Nothing that's happened has changed our working process" Mason says. "We still come in here with exactly the same

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mentality as when we first started. If I'm in an interview or a radio studio or something it's different, but you come here to Johnny's and it's like nothing ever happened. We're not ever thinking about the label. The reason they showed interest in us at first was because of our shitty recording in our bedroom, that's what they fell in love with, so they don't expect any more than that. When we did the EP they gave us an advance to go to a studio, but we wanted, and even the label wanted us to record it here to get that same sound; unpolished."

Took agrees, "The fact that when we were recording last night we could record one part and listen back to it with Paddy (Harrowsmith, who plays electric guitar with them), and go 'Nope, that's not the right sound'. You don't have some nerd tech dude going 'That's not how it's meant to be.'"

How it's meant to be, for these three mates, is how it's been for quite some time now. Took and O'Dell have been playing together since they met in their first band Underlights, and Mason came into it when Took started swooning over his skills on the Dobro, a slide guitar from the Czech republic. There are a bunch of band names they've played in - and still do - thrown around, and talk of solo gigs, writing songs together, and separately, before we get to O'Dell moving from playing the drums to singing.

"I remember I'd written a song called The Tamers," Took begins. "It was just a folk tune, and I had all the lyrics written out and Tommy was like 'Oh, do you mind if I have a sing?' So I ran through it with him once, and it was the first time he'd ever heard his voice recorded. Before that he'd just played drums, a bit of piano. I think he'd done some singing at school, in the choir for a bit, but he'd never heard his voice back."

Now Tom O'Dell's naturally smooth voice is key substance in the band's sound, bringing the gritty layers together. "He never sounds like he's forcing it," Took muses. "We all think of music really differently. Mason and I think of it more as chords and notes, just from playing the Dobro, it's the fundamentals of the instrument. But Tommy doesn't understand chords and progressions, so we can play a pretty wack chord progression and Tommy just does it all by ear, so he'll go with it. It's very cool."

Learning this, and that many of the songs are written partially by all three of the boys, it makes a lot of sense for their melodic, natural sound, that somehow just feels good.

The boys pause for a minute. Mason starts singing some lyrics scrawled in sharpie on butchers paper above the bed. It's a new song, Took's favourite he says. Took starts moving equipment around, pulling leads out from underneath the desk, and begins to apologise.

"There's stuff everywhere hey, sorry. We're going to start another [song] today, just do all the acoustics. Then tonight Harrowsmith is going to come round and we'll do electric guitars."

"Is he?" Mason sounds surprised.

"Yeah man" replied Took, un-phased. Hey listen to this one, we've started playing this one live. It's real hectic, the demos don't really get that vibe down."

On the topic of live gigs, we talk about the band not playing their first gigs until after Delete had been blasted through the country's radio airwaves with great response.

"We didn't want to rush. I started noticing a trend in the music industry in general with social media that everything just happens really fucking quick. [clicks fingers] have you noticed that?" Took gets an intense look in his eyes when he focuses on a topic he cares about. He breaks eye contact and looks at the chords coiled on the floor, saying that he just wanted to keep recording music as it was coming to them.

"I think we're up to like 53 or something new songs now. All demoed and stuff, so if you wanted to come in and record them now it's fine."

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That might sound like a lot, but to these guys this is what feels like the right thing to do.

“We didn’t know that people were going to be into Delete. We didn’t know that anyone would be into anything. You know we’ve only had the song out for three or four months now, but if we only had eight or nine songs we’d be fucking shitting ourselves right now. Everyone would be like ‘Oh well, you can’t back it up’. But we’re not worried about that at all, I know that we’ve got heaps of fucking tunes that are way better,” Took explains.

For guys who spend so much time together, and surrounded by other musical mates, it’s no wonder they’re constantly creating, they push one another.

“Mason brings 3 or 4 new crackers to the table and so then I start to wonder, ‘what the hell am I doing?’ you know, I need to start,” Took says as he starts to clip the string on his twelve-string guitar. It’s not something they have to work too hard for though, it seems. Mason pauses from playing the Dobro he’d recently picked up.

“It usually just happens. I’ve got an upright piano at my house, so I’ll just play some chords on that and sing a melody and record it on a phone, then lose the phone, and try to figure it out again...Every songwriter would have lost dozens of great songs, just from not recording them then and there; and the next day having no recollection of the song.”

Took nods as he releases the last of the strings from the guitar.

“You’re not meant to do them all at once man,” Mason looks at the empty guitar face. “I don’t think I’ve ever restrung a twelve-string in my life.”

Took shrugs his shoulders, “Man, it’s probably one of the worst things you can possibly do”.

Then suddenly snapping back on track, Took makes eye contact again, nodding his head. “When we do some of these songs I don’t even remember the chord progression for them you know,” he says. “Because we record them in a day, bang it out and email it off at 12 o’clock at night and don’t look at it or listen to it for three months. Which is kind of sick because when you do come back to it it’s like ‘wow this is good’.”

It feels good too. Feels like home, like number 37.

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