



PENNY & SPARROW

Let A Lover Drown You

Austin-made singer-songwriter duo Penny & Sparrow dwells in the spaces left between contradictions and opposing forces. In fact, it's where they're most at home. As the title of their latest album, *Let A Lover Drown You*, suggests, they know intimately the ideas of using pain as a barometer of passion and giving as a means of gaining.

Opposites themselves, vocalist Andy Baxter (lover of books and climate-controlled coffee shops) and composer Kyle Jahnke (seeker of adventure, preferably outdoors), sacrificed most semblances of comfort and certainty in their lives to take their self-released recordings they made after meeting as University of Texas roommates to the next level: full-time, D.I.Y., coast-to-coast touring.

Their gorgeous, almost luminescent harmonies paired with cutting, contemplative songs, inspired by a musical grab bag of Simon and Garfunkel, Slim Whitman, The Swell Season, Bon Iver, even Broadway composer Stephen Sondheim, earned the duo a nationwide legion of fans; many bordering on, if not, obsessed. Just ask their wives who tour manage them.

But until recently, Kyle and Andy thought of their respective talents, words and melody, as elements on "separate continents" that they fit together—Andy's voice and lyrics an audible sunbeam appearing in a dark and dusty room; Kyle's lean, yet lush arrangements following unpredictable paths with acrobatic flourishes layered over grounded grooves.

But it was in writing and recording *Let A Lover Drown You* they let those roles bleed into each other. With the help of producers John Paul White (The Civil Wars) and Ben Tanner (Alabama Shakes), they slashed unnecessary phrasing and stripped their songs down to their core.

"The process was terrifying and raw," says Kyle. "This time, we weren't afraid to voice our opinions. Lyrically, I got to hear things from Andy and tell him whether I believed him or not... I mean, I know him so well now that the other day he came in the room with a smile on his face, and I asked him 'What's wrong?'"

As they stepped into a room with just two chairs and a mic (a departure from the headphones and click tracks they used to record their two previous albums), there were few places to hide disagreement or flaws. But, they slowly fell in love with the peccadilloes they once hid; discord created harmony. Like the album's title, Andy and Kyle were exploring the notion of struggle as something worth feeling on behalf of a greater object.

“This title to us is a reminder that loving and dying are tied up,” says Andy. “It’s the cover page for an album that studies who we love, how they love us back, and how much we give up along the way.”

The thoughtful attention paid to each individual line and even the smallest instrumental placement makes the songs on *Let a Lover Drown You* so much more multi-dimensional and virile than the ubiquitous singer-songwriter folk. If foot-stomping, hand-clapping, raw-edged Americana feels like a well-worn, favorite flannel shirt, Penny & Sparrow are a made-to-measure Billy Reid suit.

“We thought of the live takes of these songs like skeletons,” says Kyle. “We would find the right one and then ask ourselves what skins—strings, filters, percussion—would fit best on top.”

That refined sound paired with finely honed lyrics is apparent from the thundering opening arc of “Finery”, showcasing the full range of their prismatic harmonies over a sweeping arrangement then leading into the enveloping “Catalogue,” one of many tracks that features a guest performance by bassist David Hood of the legendary Swampers from Muscle Shoals, Alabama, a twin city of their new hometown of Florence, Alabama where they recorded the album. Appearances by Tanner on keyboards and White with vocals dot the rest of the album.

Throughout *Let a Lover Drown You*, Andy and Kyle lyrically explore commitment, choice, and conflict. A favorite novel, *Red Rising*, where the protagonist loses his wife and turns toward darkness inspired the quietly arresting “Gold”. “It was a vehicle to discuss our willingness to change because of love,” says Andy. “Will we like what we’re made into? Will the process be painful? Am I being made better? These questions are fascinating to us.”

In “Bourbon”, they capture what it’s like to stand at those familiar fork-in-the-road moments within an understated, elegant orchestration, while the haunting “Bon Temps” came from an oral history Andy gathered talking with a family friend who survived Hurricane Katrina. Maybe, the most charismatic track on the album, “Unfold,” equal parts staggering and seductive, offers the album’s most satisfying vocal sections.

While the weight their music carries may imply that Andy and Kyle are weighed down with serious demeanors, it belies their most endearing quality.

“We try to be the same people regardless of whether we’re playing for 14 people or thousands,” says Andy. “We joke the same at home and on stage, and try to root out any degree of being disingenuous. Really, we just like to be the same humans no matter where we are.”

Whether through their jovial on-stage banter or the palpable humanity of their songs, that ability to make listeners feel as if they’re speaking to them, to relate to life’s contradictions and struggles with compassion and humor, is the true force behind Penny & Sparrow and why their music resonates so deeply.