

American
songwriter
the craft of music

ST. PAUL AND THE
BROKEN BONES
**TO THE
LIGHTHOUSE**

BY ANDREW LEAHEY | PHOTO BY DAVID McCLISTER

left to right: Chad Fisher, Allen Branstetter, Jason Mingledorff, Browan Lollar, Paul Janeway, Al Gamble, Andrew Lee, Jesse Phillips



IT'S A QUIET WEEKDAY IN BIRMINGHAM, and Paul Janeway — back home after nearly a month in Europe, where St. Paul and the Broken Bones have spent the past three summers on tour — is resting his voice.

"After every show, I feel like I got hit by a truck," he says in a buttery Alabama drawl. "It's an all-day recovery process. It's a bit easier to keep my voice in shape in Europe, though, because let's be honest — they know how to make tea over there."

Back in May 2014, when the guys headed overseas for the first time, Janeway's accent was a constant reminder that the Broken Bones — a group of amped-up Bible Belters, firing twin barrels of throwback R&B and brass-blasted soul to audiences who were either confused, enthralled or a mix of both — were strangers in a strange land. They looked like accountants and sounded like the Dap-Kings. At the helm was Janeway, fists clenched, eyes shut, howling songs about heartache in a voice that was bigger than Big Ben. The spectacle took some getting used to, but Europe quickly embraced the band. This June, St. Paul and the Broken Bones played a triumphant set at

Glastonbury, proof that the outsiders have officially found a home away from home.

It was during one of their many tours that Janeway and bass player Jesse Phillips began jotting down ideas for the band's new album, *Sea Noise*. They'd played nearly 500 shows in support of the Broken Bones' debut, *Half The City*, traveling across half the globe in the process. While they were gone, America took a nosedive into one of the most racially-divided periods this side of the Civil Rights era. Heady and heartfelt, *Sea Noise* takes a hard look at the band's southern identity, tackling everything from politics to gender norms in the process.

"You start to get more perspective than you had before, when you were just sitting in Alabama," Janeway says of the band's eye-opening trips from city to city. "You start seeing things differently. A lot of people who're from where we're from, their vision can be a little narrow. They say, 'This is the way it is.' We tried to twist that mentality with this record. We dealt with the dark corners that you encounter in a place like Alabama."

Last year, between back-to-back weekend appearances at Coachella, the guys rented a house in the San Bernardi-

no Valley National Park. They were looking for someplace secluded — a spot where they could block the distractions of the road and, in Janeway's words, "find the songs." Working with the rough blueprints of new tunes that Janeway and Phillips had already sketched out, St. Paul and the Broken Bones — their ranks newly expanded to eight members, with Jason Mingledorff and Chad Fisher joining Allen Branstetter in the horn section — built a new sound that nodded to the past while still pushing ahead.

"We didn't want to do another version of *Half The City*," the singer says. "People called us a retro band when we released that album, and I don't think that was an unfair description. We were heavily influenced by the old stuff. We still love that music, but we also love Kendrick Lamar. We're very interested in what's happening now. If we tried to make another record like *Half The City*, that would have been us telling our audience, 'This is all we have to offer,' and that just wouldn't be an honest thing to say."

Additional songwriting sessions took place back home in Birmingham, and the band eventually decamped to Nashville, where

they recorded the bulk of *Sea Of Noise* with producer Paul Butler. They took their time, further distancing themselves from *Half The City* — which had been tracked live, back when Janeway was still working a part-time gig as a bank teller — by spending as long as eight hours in search of the right drum tone. Some songs were recorded together, with the band working as a simultaneous unit; others were tracked part by part, person by person, instrument by instrument. Lester Snell, a Stax session musician who once played piano for Isaac Hayes and the Staple Singers, was drafted to write string arrangements, and the Tennessee Mass Choir was hired to add thickly-stacked harmonies to "All I Want." The choir singers also appear on "Crumbling Light Posts," a recurring song snippet that pops up three times throughout the album.

"There's a great Winston Churchill quote, where he's talking about England during the war," Janeway explains. "He calls England 'a crumbling lighthouse in a sea of darkness,' and I thought that was a really interesting concept. We're all trying to do the right thing — trying to be this light in the world — but our lives have become so filled with noise that we're

finding it hard to just have real experiences anymore. You can go to a concert now, and everyone's trying to watch the show through a cell phone. We were touring though Brussels awhile back, and I got to go look at this painting I'd always wanted to see — "The Death Of Marat" — and there were so many people taking pictures. It's like you couldn't just have a moment with it. There's this sea of noise going on. That's a common theme throughout the record, and 'Crumbling Light Posts' is the glue that makes it an album, rather than just a bunch of separate songs."

For Broken Bones fans expecting more tunes about loneliness and heartbreak, *Sea Of Noise* doesn't offer much in the way of familiarity. It reaches beyond those subjects, touching down in the otherworldly terrain of David Bowie, Prince and Sly Stone. "I'll Be Your Woman," with its gender-bending promise of love and protection, echoes the Purple One's "If I Was Your Girlfriend," while "Midnight On Earth" — a greasy slab of falsetto-heavy funk — occupies the middle ground between *There's a Riot Goin' On* and a '70s porn soundtrack.

"It's about having a relationship with a female alien," Janeway says of "Midnight."

"She's able to turn your vision around, and you can look at the world in a very different way. It's a fun-ass song, sort of like a sci-fi Family Stone thing. To me, the spectacular part of it is the ending. The horns don't play throughout the song, but they come in at the end, and it just builds. It was great to let them shine. It's really orchestral."

With more than a half-dozen members in the band these days, *Sea Of Noise* spreads its spotlight around. Whether it's Al Gamble's mix of upright piano and church organ in "Burning Home" or Andrew Lee's percussive punch in "All I Ever Wonder," every instrument gets a chance to shine. The Broken Bones haven't sounded this much like a genuine band before. The songs feel full without sounding busy, and Janeway promises that the group's reigning philosophy in the studio — "play less" — extended to him, as well.

Let's be fair, though: the frontman's voice is still the Broken Bones' most reliable showstopper, packing power and poignancy in equal doses. It's a voice he discovered as a teen in church, where weekly services provided one of the only chances for an otherwise sheltered kid to let his freak flag fly. It's still easy

to hear plenty of gospel influence in Janeway's holy-roller holler, but there's more nuance this time around, too. The soft moments are softer, the loud moments louder. If *Half The City* introduced his voice, then *Sea Of Noise* refines it. It delivers plenty of dramatic pay-offs, too, with nearly every track building its way toward something Janeway calls "a 'ta-da' moment," where he unleashes the full power of what he can do.

"The greatest singers on the planet know how to give and take," he says. "They just know their voice. And I'm still learning mine. This is the second time I've made a record, so I'm still learning how it all works. I do know, though, that if you just 'go for it' all the time without any variation, you're going to sound like a one-trick pony."

A slot on the Rolling Stones' 2015 arena tour helped open his eyes, bringing him face to face with a vocalist who's built a career not on singing prettily, but on singing with attitude.

"I didn't grow up listening to them," Janeway admits of the Stones, who cherry-picked St. Paul and the Broken Bones to join them for sold-out gigs in Atlanta and Buffalo. "I

couldn't. It was only gospel music and a little bit of soul stuff in my house. The only way I heard a Rolling Stones song was if it was in a commercial, so I'm not one of those people who listened to *Exile* growing up. Instead, I started listening when I was 18 or 19, and one of my biggest hang-ups was always getting over Mick Jagger's voice. Then I realized that his voice just fits the music. You can't imagine anyone else singing those songs but him. It's a give and take. Bob Dylan is the same way. I wouldn't put him in a vocal class — he's not technically proficient, really — but it's the perfect voice for the music he's playing."

With *Sea Of Noise* hitting stores September 9, St. Paul and the Broken Bones are staying on the road, where audiences have already heard a handful of the new songs live. The guys are scheduled to tally around 150 shows this year. That's a bit of a decrease from 2014, when they logged more than 200 gigs in support of *Half The City*. The Broken Bones aren't looking to spend more time at home, though; they're simply looking to refine. *Sea Of Noise* is a big step in that direction, showing a band that's still on a rise, but now following a more personalized path. ★