

NEW MUSIC

"JOY IS AN AMAZING FUEL": AMERICANA DUO PENNY AND SPARROW SEE THE LIGHT ON THEIR NEW ALBUM

INTERVIEWS

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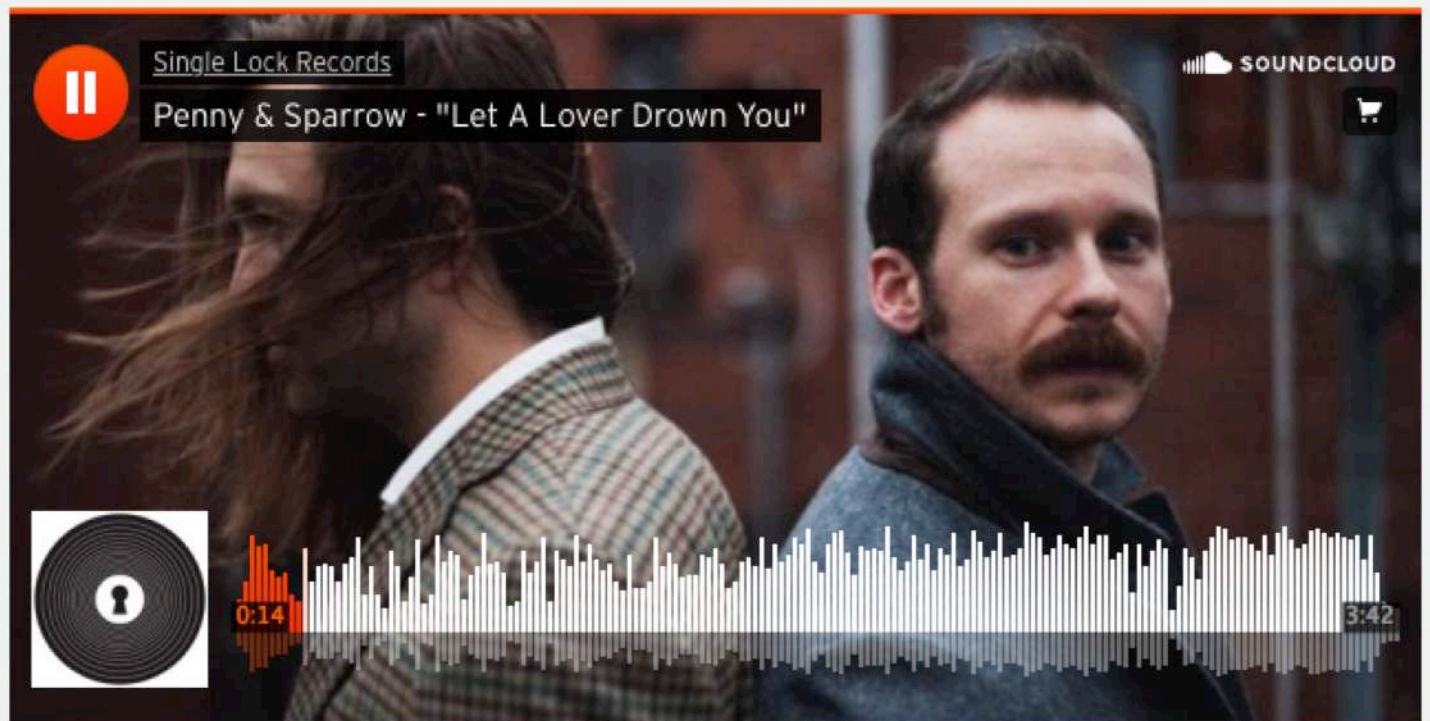
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When I call Andy Baxter, one half of the duo that is Penny and Sparrow, he's in Kansas City staying with some friends on his way to the Folk Alliance Music Festival, a festival dedicated to blues, bluegrass, roots, Celtic, Cajun, Appalachian, traditional, and world music, to hang out and play at the hotel where the festival is at. After dark, he tells me, all the rooms in the hotel become their own venues. Occupants remove the furniture, set up small stages, keep the doors open, and play acoustic sets of their music.

Penny and Sparrow is a duo—Andy Baxter and Kyle Jahnke—from Austin, Texas who are helping to revive modern Americana with their soft sound and heart-wrenching lyrics about modern day life, traveling, and, every once in awhile, *Les Miserables*. Baxter is a huge fan of the story.

Let A Lover Drown You is their third album, and might be their saddest yet. I asked Andy what went into it, where the soul of it came from, and also why he loves *Les Miserables* so fucking much. Listen to their album while you read it.



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Noisey: What's different about this album, from the last two albums? I know that this is the one that's officially cementing your career as musicians. What changed between the last and this album that inspired this one?

Andy Baxter: There's a bunch of things. One, this one, unlike the others, was written—not entirely, but almost entirely—on the road. The meat of a lot of this was written while we were touring on the last one, and we were just excited about it. Joy is an amazing fuel. Being able to be excited and realizing, "Oh my God, we're really doing this, we're musicians. Holy shit!" And getting to take that fuel and turn it into songwriting was one thing. That's a huge difference is just where we wrote it and the mindset with which we wrote it. This is the first full-time album. We didn't have any other jobs while we were writing this one. That's one difference.

You mentioned you were writing with joy, but listening to the album it felt like a very bitter album. Just generally bitter and disappointed.

Almost melancholic I feel like.

Yeah, definitely. Just sort of resigned. Was there any of that in the songwriting?

I mean, there's days like that in humanity in general. While we tour, there's days of figuring out... like this last tour is the first one that we'd ever gone that far away from home. We toured for over two months. And so because of that two straight months of being on the road and living out of a

suitcase... and we didn't have a lease on a house for over a year. And this is just when we were trying to figure out, "Oh my God, we're really going to do this, let's give it a shot, let's see what happens." And so that brought a whole bunch of growing pains. But as you can probably tell from talking to me—and you would with any other subsequent conversations—I'm a pretty happy person, a pretty happy guy. And although the things that inspire me a lot of the times are serious in nature, it's not a direct reflection of exactly what's going to go into all the music.

I think we write about hope deferred a lot because that idea is fascinating and I think that idea is an innately human one that we all have to deal with. And so we try and say really true things in difficult ways, in ways that we hadn't heard them done before. And I think you're hearing a lot of that in this album.

Can you expand on what you mean by writing about hope deferred and your interest in it?

Sure. Someone asked us the other day, "Is there a thread that ties all of these songs together in this album?" And I was thinking about it before... thankfully I got to type that one up so I had time to ruminate on it before I just ran my mouth. But what I settled on was that this whole album asks you to look at every one of the loves you've ever had in your life and really examine them with an honest pen, as objectively as you can a grading rubric. And I guess our hope is that people would look at the type of love that they take in in their life, and in doing so they would be able to be like, "Hey, what am I subjecting myself to that I don't need to, that's unhealthy? And maybe just maybe I'm neck deep in a love that's bullshit and I don't need to be anymore. And maybe just maybe I'm a shit ton more than I give myself credit for and I don't need to subject myself to this any longer."

And so there's songs on there that are about great love worth waiting for; there's songs on there that are about really tough love that needs to be avoided; there's a song on there that's entirely about being cornered in a party by an ex-lover who throws themselves at you and you have to remind yourself and them that you're over them, that you're through. So I think we examined that idea throughout the entire album. It's like, each one is a tiny glass case with a different lover in it that you have to look at and examine and hopefully learn from. And I think in that—for us anyway—there's a mourning period where you realise what you've put yourself through in the past and what you might currently be putting yourself through. But there's also a great deal of hope in the sense that I don't have to stay that way.

What made you want to reflect on love?

I don't know. I would love to say that there's a clear-cut defining moment that I chose to, but this album came quicker, I think, than the other ones did. We're proud of everything that we've done. There's no lack of pride in our earlier stuff compared to now. It almost just feels like in the

painting world we have more color options than we did in the past because we've gotten better at music, gotten better [as] songwriters, etcetera. So it's not like old songs are shit and new songs are good. If anything we just feel better at our jobs and, for whatever reason, during the season of life that we were touring, I was thinking a ton about that. There's a song on the album called "Catalog" that I think, without meaning to, becomes almost a thesis statement for the album even though it's track 3. I feel like it surmises an overlook at the whole album. There's no sickening hardship that I was going through at that time—none of us were. Yeah, the road was hard and we were figuring out how to do it, but it was mostly fantastic and mostly full of joy.

For whatever reason—maybe the things that I was reading or the things that I was listening to at the time—that thought and my past versus this incredible marriage that I find myself in now, I was just thinking about that a lot. And I was grateful, and I was heartsick for what I used to subject myself to. So I think I wrote out of that reservoir a lot. But I'm sure there's a thousand other things that I can't even dredge up in my memory that were my inspirations along the way.

What influenced your style of music? I know that you're from Austin and you listen to a lot of underground folk, but you guys seem to carve out a different sound than the usual Americana or the usual country-gospel.

I think it goes back to that quote by Kyle. I think we have never put limits on what we digest in terms of art, and so all of that comes through. There's lyric inspiration from all the expected genres that you would think of that we would listen to. Yeah, we like James Vincent McMorrow. Yes, we like Simon & Garfunkel. We like all of that stuff that would almost make sense that we like. And then past that there's a ton of music that's sort of weird that's been inspirational. Patti Page; old school gospel; James Cleveland and the Angelic Choir. There's a bunch of things that we draw from that don't fit in our genre at all, but are incredibly inspirational along the way. I think what influenced most our style was a big brother of ours who writes books and said, "Hey, just write the type of music you'd want to listen to, and when that changes, change with it." And so we're trying to do that and we've tried to do that all along the way which is pretty cool. It makes it easier to be proud of your music.

I wanted to ask you about the final song on your album, "Eponine." She's a famous literary character in *Les Misérables* and famous in Greek mythology too.

Absolutely, she's an inspiration. There's a few things in your life that you really hope... So if someone ever asks you what's your dream *Jeopardy* category, I think my dream *Jeopardy* category right now in life would probably be the 10th Anniversary cast of *Les Misérables*. I can

tell you who sang in it, I can tell you who played who. I can tell you who they brought back for the 20th Anniversary edition. I can tell you the crossovers. I can tell you why I love that musical. I know every line to that musical. And so we had another song on another album called "Valjean," that was on *Tenboom*, then we had another song on the next album called "Fantine." And I plan on doing a bit of an homage piece on every album that we do.

What is it about *Les Miserables* that gets you?

Oh God. You don't have enough time. But for a small thesis statement, I would say that I love the idea that a character that is completely deplorable can be brought back from that. I love that Eponine individually is the most heart-wrenching sacrificial character that I can think of in a lot of literature. And I love very very much her role and how tragic it is for her, to see the love of her life never really reciprocate that, and have to deal with that. And yet in the same breath to love him enough to give her life for him. I just think it's fantastic. I eat the entire story with a spoon. They're so rich, the characters are, and I think it's a great cross-section of the human heart. I think we are, at different times, every one of those characters, from deplorable and mangy all the way up to damn near honorable and noble. I love love love that musical so much.

I agree. I feel like whenever I watch it or read about it I learn something completely new, or I see something completely new, or identify with something. I think no matter what you're going through, there's always a character in there that you identify with, like you said.

I completely agree. A few years ago I had a dream. We were in New York for my birthday, we were playing a show up there, and Kyle Scatliff (who plays Enjolras in the last cast, before they just revamped it)—he had come to our show with his girlfriend, invited us to see *Les Mis* the next day. We go, we get to go backstage, I get to meet Ramin Karimloo who plays Valjean at the time, we get to sing with him backstage. It was like a complete dream come true and I freaked out all over the dude. It was awesome.

I would like to know a little bit about the title. It's an album that has such a wide range of love stories.

Okay, so let's take—because we were just on her life, we'll talk about her a little bit more—so if you look at the life of Eponine, you think about the various meanings of the word 'drown' and what can that mean. I think that at its worst, bad love feels abusive and it feels like a drowning. At its best, you're willing to die and be sacrificial for someone you love. And everything in between. I feel like good love spans the spectrum of that at all times. Better yet, honest love spans the spectrum of feeling like blue collar, nine-to-five work that you've gotta clock in for and... when we write about love I feel like every single time we're trying to allude to the fact that

maybe the best type of love imaginable is the type without an escape hatch. The type that you look at somebody and say, "Hey, no matter what, I've seen you at your shittiest and I'm not leaving and I'm not going anywhere; I'm intimately acquainted with your garbage and I'm still stuck." And I think that's really really cool and I think it's available, so I like to sing about it and we like to write about it.

That's really beautiful. Thank you so much for taking the time to speak to me.

It was a joy.