



## **Penny & Sparrow** *Wendigo*

There are things that we ought to be afraid of. Things that, rightfully, send cold sweat nightmares. For kids it can be anything from the darkness under a bed, or strangers, or crossing a busy street. For adults it might change face a bit and become things like sickness, job security, or heartbreak. And sometimes, when you point the flashlight right at the thing you're terrified of, you declaw it. You take its mask off and it returns to being an empty, boring closet with nothing inside to harm you. Or maybe the light shows an unexpected beauty in the place of what you thought was horrific. Other times, though, you aim the beam straight into the pitch black and the thing that you prayed wasn't real, the one with all the teeth, is right there smiling at you.

Texas-born duo Penny & Sparrow know these things, and on their 2017 release *Wendigo* they turn the lights off on purpose and hunt for what's really there in the dark. With a musical maturity that has been honed over half a decade and hundreds of live shows, Kyle Jahnke and Andy Baxter are presenting their most sonically diverse & ambitious album yet. Rejoined by Chris Jacobie (producer and engineer of their albums *Creature*, *Tenboom*, *Struggle Pretty* & *Christmas Songs*) Penny & Sparrow delve into numerous new and eclectic soundscapes throughout *Wendigo*, without sacrificing the sharp and deep reaching honesty that's accompanied their body of work thus far.

From the quarter kick laden "Salome and Saint Procula", to the pitched-down vibe of "Kin" and all the way to the hypnotically instrumental portion of "There's a lot of us in here", it's obvious that Penny & Sparrow have again expanded their musical palette. Thematically, Baxter's word bank reaches further than on previous albums. From the trilogy of songs humanizing the Grim Reaper ("Visiting" "Smitten" "Moniker") and cascading down to the Urban Legend love song "Wendigo", the intersection of daily grit and supernatural fable is analyzed in depth. On the back half of the record, Jahnke's melodic leadership extends even deeper into beauty and surprise. With seamless transitions marking the tracks from "A Kind of Hunger" to "Let Me Be Crucial", Jahnke arranged a six song musical terrain that is both complex in its varied offerings and impressive in its execution.

Trademark witticism and playfulness stitch together a Penny & Sparrow live experience. Baxter and Jahnke possess the unique ability to make a large venue, such as a recent opening slot at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium, feel as intimate as a cozy listening room. The enthusiastic standing ovation the duo received that night exhibits the connection Penny & Sparrow make, even with a new audience. This is due, in no small part, to the aforementioned levity they bring to stage each night. As it turns out, the juxtaposition of introspective lyrics with comedic asides in between has proven a winning cocktail. Listeners find themselves vacillating between thought provoking

consideration and well-earned laughter at any Penny & Sparrow performance. When asked why this flow accompanies their live performance, the duo nonchalantly replies, "Because that's honest. Life is not all simple ease or heavy gloom. To laugh and cry back and forth is pretty true assessment of how this life goes." Both Baxter and Jahnke know the value of cathartic music, yet, with seeming ease they read a room and know when it's time to speak joy and lead an audience to laughter.

Arriving a year and a half after *Let a Lover Drown You*, their Muscle Shoals-recorded, John Paul White-produced 2015 album, *Wendigo* was born from healing and heat. Having moved to Florence, AL to record in the Single Lock studio, Baxter and Jahnke found themselves with time off in their first boiling Alabama summer. Exhausted from touring and life-weary in general, the duo turned to songwriting for catharsis. A makeshift recording rig was set up in the living room of their shared home and the duo began workshopping song after song. Over the course of that summer, while their wives (and a dog named Gator) bustled around the microphone during sessions, the bones of the record were set. The original plan was to listen to the rough tracks and eventually redo everything cleaner. That desire changed though as they fell in love with the honest sounds of cooking, old door hinges, silverware clinking, and the rest of their Alabama home noise. As affection for the demo's grew, Baxter and Jahnke realized that they wanted to keep as much of them as possible. Thus, listening to *Wendigo* is hearing the honest soundtrack for a real season in the life of two families. The footsteps, the creaking and the din of supper prep heard throughout the songs all reinforce the sense of integrity that has long been a staple of the band. *Wendigo* will be Penny & Sparrow's 5<sup>th</sup> full-length album. Beginning as therapeutic demos in northern Alabama and ending as a fully realized project at Jacobie's home studio in San Antonio, TX, this record leaves the duo smirking and feeling accomplished.

The creature with which this album shares its name is a shape shifter. One moment it looks completely normal and the next it's all fangs and gore. In an instant it can slip it's skin and go back and forth from ominous and ugly to hope and lovely. Life can be like that. Hell, all of us can be like that. Knowing this, Penny & Sparrow offer *Wendigo* as the flashlight you can arm yourself with. Use it to see what's worth fearing and what was actually beautiful all along. Shine it into whatever patch of darkness scares you. For better or worse, at least you'll know what's there.