

Paul Janeway BY DEAN BUDNICK

▶ **"THIS WAS THE FIRST** record where I didn't know how I'd handle it if it got a massive negative reaction," St. Paul & The Broken Bones frontman Paul Janeway says of the band's third studio album, *Young Sick Camellia*. It's the initial installment of a projected three-album series written from the perspectives of the singer, his father and his grandfather. The songs on *Young Sick Camellia* present Janeway's point of view, with the title referencing the Alabama state flower and the Caravaggio painting *Young Sick Bacchus*.

"It's a self-reflective painting," he continues. "And this is certainly a self-reflective record. What was really terrifying about it is that I really opened myself up. If I'd made a record about the Candy Land board game, then I wouldn't care. But this was the first record where I felt, 'If this thing gets torn apart, I don't know what I'll do because this is me and you don't like me.' I think that would've been tough."

Young Sick Camellia, which was produced by Kendrick Lamar collaborator Jack Splash, has thankfully received the critical approbation it merits. Still, there is a bittersweet element, as Janeway's grandfather passed away about two months after recording some spoken-word interludes. As the singer notes, "The record has taken a different tone than it did initially. It's a little eerie and kind of haunting."

How did you come to select Jack Splash to produce your new record?

Jack is a character—that's the best way I can say it. He was born and raised in Los Angeles and he is just overwhelmingly positive. But what shocked me

more than anything else was that he knew how to work with the band. That's been one of the bigger issues with producers in the past for us. There are just so many people; we've got so many ideas and, sometimes, it gets too complicated.

But we did a session with Jack, and he knew how to handle it. He really produced it. It was amazing to watch him. The one story I always go back to—and it's something I've never had with another producer—is when we recorded "Bruised Fruit," which is the last track on the record, and it's a very personal song for me and very tough for me to sing.

We were in the studio and I was having a hard time getting through the song—I was choking up and crying. When I finally made it through one take, Jack just gave me this gigantic hug and said, "I want to thank you because you're making something that's utterly beautiful." I'm not a touchy-feely guy, but it was kind of a moment. This was more than us just getting in the room and recording. He knew how personal it was for me and he bought into that vision. I've never had that connection with a producer before.

I've heard that you and Leon Bridges had a conversation about your respective artistic directions.

Honestly, it was a short conversation. We've known of each other for a little while but it's hard to maintain relationships in this business. We're both pretty busy, although we'll see each other at festivals and so on. But when we were at a festival in Edmonton, he asked me about what we had done with our second record [2016's *Sea of Noise*]. I told him: "You do you. At the end of the day, it's your



name on it. If you want to make some sort of '90s R&B record, then do that." He's so much bigger than us and has so much more pressure on him. I have to imagine that's a difficult place to be. We're three records in and we've carved a little niche. But I think he's doing just fine. [Laughs.]

With any artist that I've admired—like Bowie, Prince, Radiohead—the most important thing has been to evolve. Don't try to force anything, but do what feels right. We were supposed to do this album with Columbia Records, but they wanted a pop record—a real, straight-up pop record—and we weren't really interested in that. There's always gonna be pop elements to what we do because we don't sing death-metal; we like melody. But we like interesting melody.

So it was one of those things where we were fighting it a little bit, even down to the title, where some labels were like, "What is a *Camellia*?" They didn't think it was very easy to say, to which I responded, "It isn't, but that's OK." We had that struggle a little bit this go round, and we decided we're just not a major-label band.

You can't look at other people's journeys and be like, "I wish I had that." Well, you can, but you're going to have to do certain things that you might not be willing to do and you have to be OK with that. That's the biggest thing I've learned. You also have to understand that there are consequences

to doing what you want to do on your terms. Hopefully, all the success in the world comes to you, but it can take time.

Jumping to your live show, you often seem to get caught up in the moment, particularly with how you move onstage. After the

evening is over, are you ever surprised by what you've done?

Yeah, it almost happens on a nightly basis because I'm terrified of heights and I've had the tendency to start climbing up balconies and standing on the edge of them. Needless to say, it worries the band. And if I weren't caught up in the moment with the adrenaline and everything going on, I'd be terrified. But, for some reason, I've become death-defying in the show. There have definitely been times where I've done something strange onstage, and everyone'll be like, "Are you alright?" Those are the really good shows. You don't want to be too aware; you just want to be aware enough that you're not gonna do anything too stupid. I do plenty of stupid things, but not something where I'll really hurt myself.

I can recall a night in Boston where you ended up under a rug beneath the stage.

Yeah, the guys affectionately call it the "Carpet Burrito." [Laughs.] We had a carpet as part of the staging, and I would get under the tom riser and just tear things up. So we got rid of the carpet. We don't have it on this tour, but the stuff we have onstage is a lot more expensive, so they told me: "If you're gonna do that, please get offstage." So now they give me a wireless mic for the last song and I get to go wherever I want. It's been a fun experience. 🍌