



Dustbowl Revival – *Is It You, Is It Me*

Dustbowl Revival has always been about pushing the boundaries of what American roots music can be. In many ways, they could have continued creating joyful, booty-shaking songs and cut-to-heart folk-rock ballads that lift up their transcendent live shows – and mining new energetic material from the place where folk music, funk and soul meet.

But the band's newest album, *Is It You, Is It Me*, coming January 31 via their own Medium Expectations label and Nashville's Thirty Tigers, is something different entirely. Produced by Sam Kassirer [Lake Street Dive, Josh Ritter, David Ramirez] and engineered by Brian Joseph [Bon Iver, Local Natives, Sufjan Stevens], it represents the latest stage in a band that never stops evolving and refuses to stand still.

After celebrating over a decade of sonic adventuring, playing thousands of shows together in ten countries and counting, and collecting a devoted and growing fanbase coast-to-coast, the six core members – founder Z. Lupetin, Liz Beebe, Josh Heffernan, Matt Rubin, Ulf Bjorlin and Connor Vance – knew they had to create something bigger.

The 13 new songs were not road-tested and tired out by the time they made it to the recording studio: in fact Kassirer inspired the band to create the album in a two-week flash of intense creativity, with many of the songs layered and composed day-by-day in the studio. Acting like a nimble rock orchestra, each member played multiple instruments, and the group brought in new musicians on symphonic brass, and local friends to sing as a spur-of-the-moment choir.

The scary novelty of this creative process exposed doubt and tension - but also brought out a new courage in the band to dig deeper than ever. The result is a sonic revelation and a reckoning. Maybe it captures a conversation that hasn't happened yet: between people on both sides of a divide that simply don't know how to talk to each other. Many of the songs are like plays unfolding verse by verse. It's the yin-yang conversational harmony that is the true specialty of Z. Lupetin and co-lead singing dynamo Liz Beebe, who both grew up performing and writing in the theater. With a big brass-and-strings band building the sets around them, *Is It You, Is It Me* isn't afraid to explore the personal and political tension that the group may have shied away from facing before.

With the recent departure of longtime co-writer/mandolin player Daniel Mark (who co-wrote several songs on the new album) and bassist James Klopfleisch (replaced for the

record by the talented Yosmel Montejo), Dustbowl Revival's core members banded together and expanded their abilities to make the album come to life: Connor Vance stars on wildly inventive violin and for the first time on harmonizing electric guitars, Matt Rubin shines on trumpet, flugelhorn and doubles on vintage keyboards, Ulf Bjorlin sets the tone on ever-brash and sometimes surprisingly tender trombones, and Josh Heffernan brings it all together on his rock-solid and always exploratory drums, and a plethora of percussion.

"I feel like we grew up for real on this record," Lupetin adds. "Both as musicians who have come of age on the road together as a kind of accidental family – and as collaborators making music even we don't know how to describe or pin down. It's exciting and a bit terrifying."

The album tackles uneasy topics – often where the political feels personal, especially in the defiant "Get Rid of You," which was inspired by the student activists who emerged from the tragic Parkland High School shooting in Florida. The ominous driving brass groove of "Enemy," sung powerfully by Beebe, hones in on a painful generational split between a daughter and her parents who may have voted in a tyrant, and have become strangers to her. This yearning search for common ground pervades the record as a whole.

The band's humor and heart also shines through – there's the cheeky, New Orleans second-line feel of "Nobody Knows (Is It You)" about a quirky character who runs for president and accidentally wins, then gives it up on a whim when he discovers a greater good in nature; the catchy pop bounce of "Ghost" about a mysterious lover who disappears without a trace; heart-on-the-sleeve love songs like "I Wake Up"; or the first-kiss electric guitar and percussion nostalgia of "Penelope," which harkens to early Paul Simon and Van Morrison, equally huge influences for the band.

The group's signature intertwined vocal leads star on the opening track "Dreaming" which tackles the deep vulnerability of revealing your secrets and your soul every night in front of an audience. But where the band really sets on a new course is on lushly cinematic, orchestrated set pieces like "Mirror," "Runaway" and, most notably, the current fan favorite and live showstopper "Sonic Boom," about the struggle to reveal who you really are in the hidden, rose-colored world of social media. There's a new widescreen expansiveness to these songs that wouldn't be out of place in a packed arena or orchestra hall with a full neon light show.

Dustbowl Revival's story started humbly. Nearly 12 years ago Z. Lupetin – a Chicago native who attended college in Michigan came to L.A. to be a playwright and screenwriter, grew disillusioned with his job in advertising, and placed a hopeful ad on Craigslist. He sought to find fellow musicians who shared his roving love of Louis Armstrong, Bob Wills, Old Crow Medicine Show, Paul Simon, Aretha Franklin and the brass bands of New Orleans, but also wanted to write songs like Americana pioneers Wilco, Lucinda Williams

and even Bruce Springsteen. There are still players in the group who responded to that initial odd quest.

Perhaps the number that best encapsulates Dustbowl Revival's *raison d'être* from the new record is "Just One Song," an emotional, acoustic composition that probably wouldn't have made it to the album without the encouragement of producer Kassirer. It's about a performer realizing that despite the doubt and the struggle all around, music itself is always the most important thing.

"Maybe we don't know where this journey will take us or how long it will last," acknowledges Lupetin, "That's my take on the importance of what we try to do. Music elevates us, lifts us up, makes us change our minds, takes us out of our comfort zones. If just one person can be moved by just one song, that's enough."

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