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BASTILLE



Dan Smith, lead singer of UK rock outfit Bastille, showed no signs of stage fright when I met him just a few hours before the band opened for Weezer at KROQ's sold out Almost Acoustic Christmas show. Instead, he gushed over Green Day's performance from the night before.

"They did an awesome "Greatest Hits" set. It's amazing to play alongside bands we used to listen to when we were kids. I'm really looking forward to seeing Phantogram today. I've been listening to them all day," he told me.

For any fangirls wondering, Smith is just as handsomely chiseled as YouTube concert footage would lead you to believe. He is also utterly sincere, relatable, and most of all, thoughtful. Perhaps this last attribute is less surprising, as the Leeds alumnus helped produce both the band's albums and writes and arranges all of their songs. I learned from Instagram that he's a fan of British author Zadie Smith and currently reading her latest novel "Swing Time." Another check off your list, ladies: He reads!

Smith formed Bastille in 2010, naming the band after the French holiday which happens to be his birthday. Keyboardist Kyle Simmons, guitarist and bassist Will Farquarson, and drummer Chris Wood round out the rock bastion, which first garnered mainstream attention after the release of their single 'Pompeii' off their debut studio album *Bad Blood*. They've been riding the swelling, uncharted currents of fame ever since, and their sophomore album *Wild World* received overwhelming praise when it dropped in the summer of last year.

If *Bad Blood* was an introduction to Smith's masterful songwriting and ornate instrumentation, *Wild World* firmly positions Bastille as the next supergroup to watch. The 47-minute album darts outside of their comfort zone with tracks that revive a 90's vibe and at times drift into hip hop. Unraveling their puzzling lyrics will reveal obscure references that range from true crime novels to Shakespearean dramas.

"It all clicked when I started writing our single 'Warmth'," Smith said. "I remember watching the news after a particularly horrific terrorist event and there's just that feeling when you're watching the news, when it's just headline after headline of despair. It's difficult to wrap your head around it and you feel at a bit of a loss because what's the takeaway message from that? A lot of the songs on the album are kind of about that, just trying to figure out how to process and get your head around things. There is no answer, but in 'Warmth' it was about turning off the TV and going out and finding someone to literally lose yourself in. A lot of the songs on the album examine the different ways that we distract ourselves."

Though our homelands are separated by several thousand miles and the Atlantic Ocean, we agreed that both were undergoing similar identity crises. I wondered how Smith was able to create politically charged music without taking sides and whether he felt an obligation to reflect the times.

"I think it's completely up to the artist," he said. "It's complicated because so much about why we listen to music and why we watch films is about distraction and taking a vacation from reality. You don't go and watch an action film for an hour and a half because you want to think about your student debt. But at the same time what makes music amazing is its ability to articulate things that you've never thought about."

Smith somehow manages to craft lyrics that are nebulous enough to serve as the soundtrack for a scorned ex-lover or a young revolutionary fed up with babbling pundits. With so many catchy, single-worthy tracks, it's no wonder the band was invited to join Coachella's flawless 2017 line-up.

The first leg of Bastille's tour was drawing to a close, but Smith didn't seem especially road worn. He admitted that he was, "Looking forward to putting on clothes that I haven't been wearing on rotation for the last three months," but it was mention of the new year that brought true impatience to his voice.

"We've got a big US tour coming up, which I'm really excited about. We did the tour in the UK and Europe and the show that we put together was quite nuts. From the moment you walk into the room, there's a 1984-esque politician who hosts the entire show. We've also got a mixtape coming out so there's a lot to look forward to."

I speculated that this mysterious mixtape might be the long-rumored release from Annie Oakley Hanging, Smith's side project with To Kill a King member Ralph Pelleycounter, but I only got that signature, mind-erasing grin in response. The visual aspects of Bastille prove to be as murky as their lyrics and fans can no doubt expect more absurd, head-turning concepts on the band's Spring tour.

"I'm a big fan of David Lynch," Smith told me. "I like to use the stuff we make as a fun excuse to get creative and think outside the box. I'm not interested in it just being the four of us on an album cover, I'd rather it was a mad shot of two kids hanging off a building and make people think a bit more. I like there to be an openness to the songs and what we do so that people can make their own interpretations."

Perhaps that's why the band's fanbase is so diverse: there's something for everybody. The crowd cheering for Bastille at KROQ's Almost Acoustic ranged from retired metalheads to fashion-studded millennials. Had the band's stage presence not been so captivating, I would have been tempted to people-watch instead.

The band more than measures up live, with Smith hitting falsettos that Mariah Carey would envy. The audience stomped joyously, seeming to exorcise themselves of the trials that 2016 had wrought. However you interpret it, Bastille's music provides a much-needed salve to help steel ourselves for an uncertain future.

