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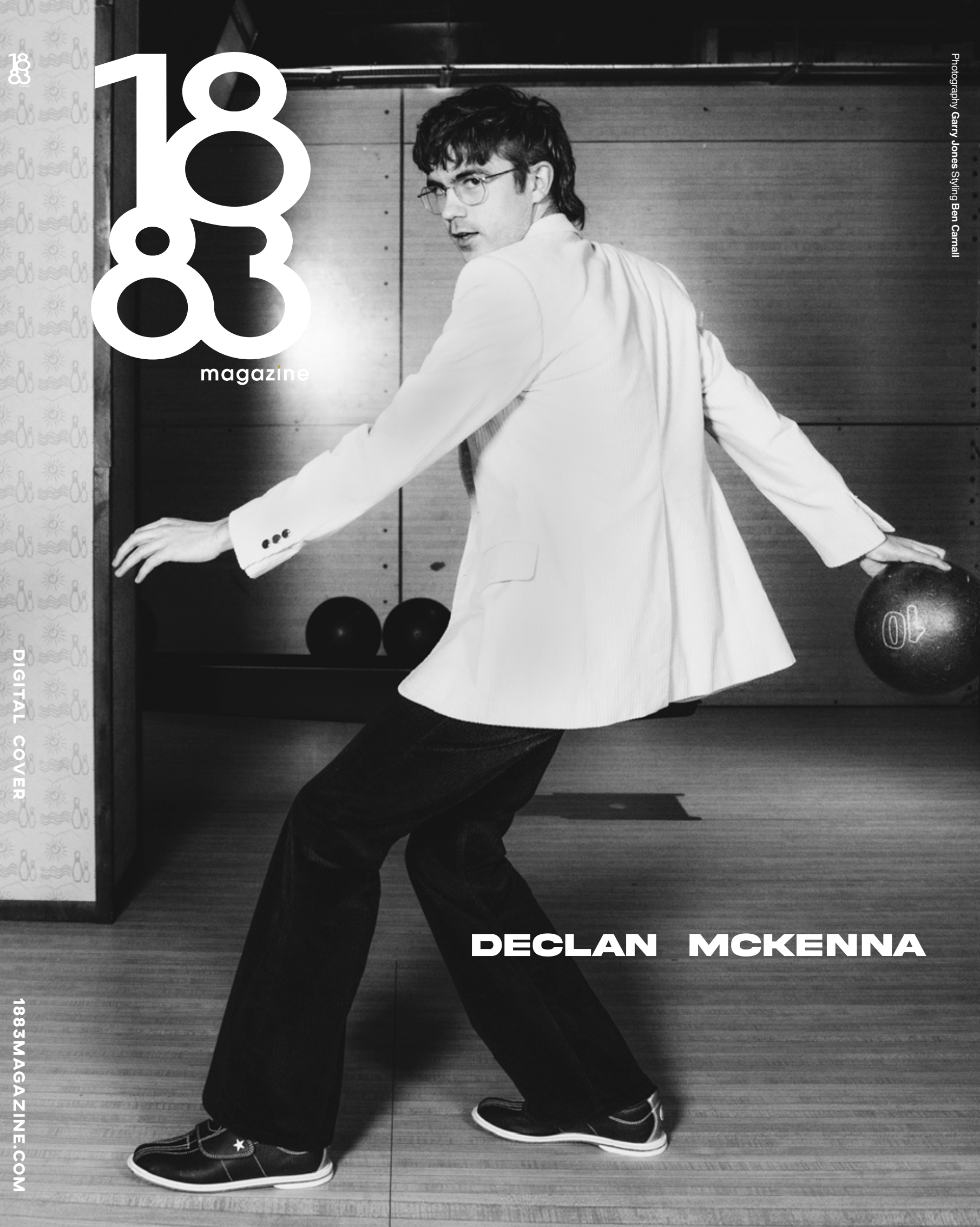
magazine

1883

DIGITAL COVER

1883MAGAZINE.COM

DECLAN MCKENNA





PHOTOGRAPHY GARRY JONES STYLING BEN CARNALL

DECLAN MCKENNA

ON DECLAN MCKENNA'S THIRD STUDIO ALBUM WHAT HAPPENED TO THE BEACH?, HE LEARNS TO LET GO AND ALLOW THE MUSIC TO SPEAK FOR ITSELF.

136

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a collection of youth cult

Declan McKenna joins our Zoom call from his living room. He's sitting on a comfy-looking couch, posters and a tarot card tapestry bedeck the wall behind him, and he's eating a bowl of what looks like tortellini. He might seem like your average twenty-something were it not for the fact that Declan McKenna is anything but average. If you're an indie-pop listener, alt-rock fan or simply fall into the category of a TikTok user, you've heard McKenna's music. So, yes, that's basically everyone.

At 16 years old, McKenna first broke into the scene in 2015 with his monumental hit, "Brazil", followed by a debut record, *What Do You Think About the Car?* two years later. By the time he was ready to drop his second studio album in 2020, McKenna was experiencing imposter syndrome and uncertainty facing the world as it was dealing with a global pandemic, a social media hellscape and climate catastrophe. Issues that are so monumental, and so beyond a singular person's ability to solve, the kind of issues that have the capacity to suffocate you if you let them.

After seeking out therapy and learning to trust his own instincts, McKenna and his music are both getting a chance to breathe on his third album, *What Happened To The Beach?* No longer bending to the pressure he felt from the industry, McKenna is enjoying letting his songs get looser and weirder. While previous records focused on corruption, personal demons, and political upheaval, this album is decidedly lighthearted. With a beachy and sometimes spacey soundscape, listeners are getting a glimpse at a different side of the singer-songwriter. After years of battling the pressures and anxieties of an industry that can at best be described as fickle, McKenna has reached a place of relaxed confidence. Maybe we all should take a page out of his book and learn to loosen up. If it can bring out the best in McKenna, perhaps it can in the rest of us too.

In conversation with 1883, Declan McKenna discusses how therapy helped him take control over his emotions, enjoying the twisted emotions of melancholy and living with the fact that he wrote a ton of great music that he couldn't put on this record.



First things first, I think this album is incredible. I listened to it like three times top to bottom before we met. I loved it so much. It feels very classic Declan McKenna, with a little bit of a new twist. As someone who's been a fan for years, and speaking for other fans, I think everyone's gonna love this record. Oh, yeah, I'm really excited to get it out. It's obviously a new chapter and all that, so I'm excited. Thank you.

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184

You said your single "Nothing Works" came out of frustration, of feeling boxed in and tied to expectations, but it's a euphoric tune, at its core it's a celebration of being true to yourself." What do you think some of those expectations that you were feeling were? And how did you go about beginning to defy them? The thing with "Nothing Works" is that it kind of came at the end of the album. Every other track was practically there. I had the devil in my ear about what was going to be a single, you know, sort of questioning the whole concept of what I've been doing. Which you can only really take as inspiration when you're trying to go down a certain avenue. You feel really good about it, but you still can't escape the industry's fears that it's not the same as what it once was. And, you know, perhaps you kind of have to have to sell the same thing over and over again to keep people interested. I thought "Well, I'm not really exactly gonna go back on myself and say, 'Oh, yeah, I need to keep doing the same things rather than moving forward and working on music in a different way.'" So, "Nothing Works" really came after I'd already kind of defied those expectations. And then you're left with the other point, if people love when you talk about this, that or the other, or when you're really direct with your lyrics. I thought, "Here is direct for you." I wrote "Nothing Works" because the album itself is a more abstract project, and I just didn't want it to be bogged down in the same conversations and the same things that I've already expressed my opinions on already. For me, in music, I can't set out a certain guideline and say I'm only gonna write songs like this, because it's just, I don't know, you just get sick of it. That's why each album of mine has been a slightly different sort of project. That, for me, is how I keep doing things that I think I want to listen to, and maybe other people want to listen to as well. But I can only really rely on myself for my own taste. After a while, you kind of just have to take it on the chin and be like, "Look, people are afraid to try new things." Generally, in the music industry, there is a lot of change. And for me, I wasn't scared because I just trusted the music. I trust what I'm doing. I trust my own taste. That was the kind of really nice point that I got to with this album. Nothing Works kind of popped in at the end is a little like, "No, I'm definitely. I'm definitely sticking to what I'm doing."

I think in the music industry, you're damned if you do, damned if you don't in a way. Because if you do too much of the same stuff over and over again, everyone thinks it's boring. But if you take a risk and change your sound there's the fear that you'll lose your audience. That's what I think. I mean, I kind of had a bit of a baptism of fire getting into it. Yet from the first songs after "Brazil" came out, I was always kind of pushing things into different realms. I remember being in school after I'd written "Brazil" and being like, "Ah, I need to do this surfer rock, psychedelic kind of thing and try to write songs in the same vein as X." It just never really worked for me to keep working in that way. It never has. I think really anyone who's a fan of my music kind of knows that I don't really look back. So, yeah, it's a really great place. And really "Nothing Works" is just somewhat a song of defiance. But really, it's just fun and adds to the whole kind of just goofy nature of the record, I think.

I want to talk about how you have recently started going to therapy, and how you've said that it's helped you step out of your comfort zone and allowed you to open up and unload. Do you think that has allowed you to tap into any new songwriting ideas or concepts in your work? Yeah, well, I went into therapy maybe just before the second album came out and since then I've kind of just really found the tools to understand what's going on and understand my emotions, I guess, and actually process them. I think it just allows you to focus for longer, you're not quite as wrapped up. That was the thing for me, if I wasn't feeling so good, if I was feeling this sort of constant low level anxiety, that would dictate my emotions, sometimes dictate my actions. You're almost blocking your emotions out or blocking out everything else all the time. It doesn't really allow you to commit yourself to what you're doing. It doesn't really allow you to think about what you're doing. I really like making music and all of that, but I was working on stuff that I felt was very intense. I felt like maybe part of that was because it was kind of blocking it out with kind of loud, intense ideas and noise. I feel the main difference over the last few years is being able to just relax a bit, and I've relaxed a bit in making this album and not anything in particular on display, just needing to like it, to feel good and not worry about the end product.

Yeah, not as much to prove anymore. Exactly.

So, did you move to California for the production of the record? Kind of... It wasn't like I wrote the album and then produced it in LA. The transition was kind of seamless. It wasn't like I'm writing and then I go into the studio and record it. I had a bunch of material, I had lots and lots of stuff that I'd written. I just kind of needed to figure out what I was doing with it. I went out to LA for about two months and started basically immediately working with Gianluca Buccellati, who ended up producing the album. We just got on really well and started writing stuff together quickly. Gradually, I just played him everything that I had. In fact, one evening, I must have played him 30 or 40 songs that I had lying around.

Thirty or forty! That's so many songs! Yeah, I just had all these ideas, you know, and he just kept kind of pushing for the ones that were further out. Then he said, "come on this there's got to be more here." I guess that started the production of the album, so to speak, and just seeing it as a full project. But prior to that I had some versions of a couple of songs that aren't a million miles off what is on the album because as I say, the process was kind of fluid – we never really scrapped the demos. Songs like "Honest Test," "The Phantom Buzz," "Mezzanine," "It's An Act," all have elements from my versions – which I did in the UK – from the demo. The production started probably just before the pandemic, and we didn't really stop writing right through the process. As I say, "Nothing Works" came right at the end. It was just a very different process from what I'd done before where it had been a little more linear, a little more writing and then going into the studio to record everything.

So, if "Nothing Works" was the last song you did, what was the first one?

Well, I think the first one I started, probably not, I doubt was the first one I fully wrote. But the first idea was "Breath of Light." Then I feel the first one that really felt like I'd gotten the direction for what I was going to do was "Wobble." "Wobble" came from a weird, somewhat mid-pandemic session. We'd been in and out of lockdowns, and at one point I was just living back at my parents. As I was able to go into London to work with Neil Comber, who's an old collaborator that I've worked with since the first album, he'd laid down this really strange beat and the guitar part kind of just came out of me. It really felt like a clean slate once I was kind of listening back to that. It felt like it had this new vibe that I wanted to lean into, I liked that it was slightly wonkier. It felt cool.

How do you think that your producer, Gianluca, influenced the sound of this record for you? He really was just about leaning into the sort of slightly abstract... but not even necessarily abstract... just working in the moment a little more and not thinking too heavily about the concept. The music that he likes to make just kind of is more about the feeling and the tone, and the vibe that it sets rather than sort of thinking too deeply about the meaning. So obviously, I'd get sort of deep into the lyrics when I was writing them, but really, a lot of the stuff that stuck is just the first thing that came out of me when I was coming up with an idea or something close to that anyway. He just added a bit of finesse to what I was already working on. He has his own sort of sound which I think is best heard maybe on "Elevator Hum" and "Mulhollands Dinner and Wine." He also has a way that he plays electronic drums, which I think you can really hear on those tracks. The chords as well are also very him. Those are the bits where I think you can distinctly pick him out. But obviously, we were just working together on everything.

I felt like this record was really fun and bright, but also had these spacey and ethereal moments. Those two vibes don't make sense to put together somehow in my brain, but you've done it and it works so well. How did you land on finding that sound and striking that balance between the spaciness and the sunshiny fun of it all? Yeah, I mean, I just love psychedelia and otherworldly sounds and music. That's often what I'm drawn to. I definitely was leaning towards stuff that wasn't super intense and more of a breath of fresh air. It was just a combination of all of my influences and that sort of new approach of doing things in a more direct and simple way and not overthinking it. We landed on a bunch of stuff that was kind of spacey and kind of psychedelic in that way but it doesn't have that intensity that some psych rock has. Even my last album has a kind of psychedelic tinge to it but in a much more intense capacity. I feel like a lot of my favourite music has this sort of, or at least a lot of stuff I've been listening to the last couple of years, is simple and has these easy grooves, but also with strange sort of soundscapes. Stuff like Unknown Mortal Orchestra, stuff like Connan Mockasin. It dips into those two worlds and just kind of made sense to me.

Do you think about your live show at all, when you're recording? I felt like this entire album has such great intros and outros for every song. I can almost picture how that would work when you're on stage. Yeah, kinda. It's hard not to think about it. I feel less so than the last album. I was really thinking about the live performance because on the last album, it really felt like a band-y record. It was, really. We basically played it live before we recorded it, because the band had also learned everything. With this one, it's a little bit more detached from where it would go once it was in a live environment. But really, I think it's just down to the compositions being engaging, to some extent. We're always thinking about keeping things succinct and moving things on when they feel like they need to move on. I think that is what works in a live environment as well. It's hard not to think about it, but I wasn't letting it influence everything too much. But the songs have a simplicity to them — in the little parts that come together there are only a handful of parts going on at once. That really lends itself to being played live, obviously. It's not a million instruments going on, there is actually a simplicity to everything.

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How did you go about arranging the flow of the album? That always sounds like the hardest part to me, fingering out the order. It took a while. But it was gradually just piecing things together. I knew I wanted "Elevator Hum" somewhere at the start. You know, there were little songs where I just knew they would sort of live together, like I kind of figured out "I Write the News" and "Sympathy" would work because "I Write the News" is this sort of random news thing. Then "Sympathy" comes in with the fucking News of the World intro [laughs]. It sounds like a news channel to me. Little things like that sort of came about and it was really simple. I spent a bit of time in Brighton after we'd really finished recording with my friend, Jill, who is in a band called Truces. We were kind of piecing things together and adding a couple of finishing touches – that was when I started building exactly what it would be. It feels like this nice journey because there are these songs that have little friends which they live next to, but it seems to float along really nicely. You can kind of tune in and out of it as well, you can really focus on it or you can leave it in the background, the flow just kind of works.

I like that it kind of comes down to earth with "It's an Act", then you kind of go and tail away with "Mezzanine" and it's really been quite abstract for a while and then it kind of is a reminder that it's all a bit of a show. "It's an Act" is maybe the most negative song, but I think the beauty of it is that the album itself is a testament to the fact that I have been more confident in being myself, which is kind of what "It's an Act" is about – putting on a show for people, feeling like you have to be switched on all the time or have to be something or someone.



My favourite song on the album was "I Write the News," I loved that one so much. Do you feel like you've got a favourite one? Does that ever change for you? I really like "Wobble." Just because I think the guitar part is so good. I don't really know where it came from. It feels like a classic Irish guitar part or something like that, but with this sort of weird melancholy thing to it. It's just the kind of thing that I always really wanted to write, but it just never seems to happen. You get maybe one guitar part like that every year... if that! It's just really hard to make something that feels original and distinct. I really liked that one and you know, it toes that nice melancholy line, which I love. I love melancholy music. I love feeling the twisted emotions of melancholy.

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I feel like there's an undertone of melancholy but it's also not entirely melancholy either. When I think about a melancholy kind of song, it's something slower and more sad. But what you've done here feels more true to what the essence of that emotion really is. Sadness is never just purely sadness, there's obviously so much nuance to it. I think that that really shines through in all the music that you put out in this album, especially. Thanks. I grew up with The Beatles and their music always has a sadness tinge to the happiness or happiness tinge to the sadness. There's never anything that's straight up one emotion or one feeling. Emotions, I guess, are complex... Like music. I think that was the beauty of this album. It's a little more abstract, I can't really pin down exactly what every single song is about. But, you know, it allows the feelings to be a little more complicated. That's the beauty of music. It's like you're colouring in your emotions in the weirdest way possible.



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How did you land on your album title for this record? It's really hard to pin it down. But as I say, I love "Wobble", and it's a lyric from that song. I felt like it just had this sort of mystery, which I think that album wanted. I love a question as an album title, generally. This one may lead you down a few rabbit holes. There are definitely some elements where I'm talking about the environment on some of the albums, but it's not really a major part of any concept. But, you know, What Happened to the Beach?... I don't know [laughs]. I feel like everyone has a version of that. Everyone has things changing around them, nature is changing, the world is changing. The whole album is a big change. It's not super specific, but it has this mystery to it. When I first thought of it I knew it was the one. I was like, "That's it!" I didn't even think about it anymore [laughs].

You're also slightly less surf rock in this album. Slightly less of a beachy sound throughout. Right. Well, it's beachy to some extent... The album was written largely, you know, in sort of beachy places Brighton in the south of England and LA and stuff. So there's beaches involved in the process [laughs].

Were there any songs that you almost cut and decided you had to keep when all was said and done? There's a lot of songs. I've made so much stuff. There are a lot of songs that aren't on the album that really could have been, like really good stuff. I'm just counting on myself to actually do something with them and work them into future projects. Really, there is a whole other album and stuff that we made that is very close to done. But I feel pretty settled because of the ones that I chose once I'd figured it out. It just has this flow about it. I wanted this album to have that sort of gentle streak to it and some of the other songs were just a little more electronic. And I think that's a different project. I think this album actually, as much as it is probably my most my most digital album in the way that it was worked on in the soundscapes and stuff, it still has this really organic feel to a lot of the songs. There are a lot of guitars still, and there's a lot of stuff that is kind of free-flowing in a way. The material that didn't make the cut just felt a little more sharp and electronic and stuff. I feel like that could just be an album of its own. So yeah, there were a few decisions to make, but once they were made I was happy. I just need to live with the fact that I've written some songs that I really like and now need to figure out what to do with [laughs].

Sitting in your back pocket for now! I want the album to be a nice listen, you know? I don't want you to just bludgeon people's ears with too much music. When there's too much music, people can't actually take it in. When an album goes on for too long it's a horrible feeling. You're into it, and then you're like, "Agh, I'm kind of sick of this now." You get sick of it.

Honestly, I thought it was the perfect length. You're not too short and leaving anyone desperate for more, and you're not overstaying your welcome. It's the ideal record, in my opinion. I also want to say how much I love this cover art. It's sick. Henry Pierce shot it! He's a multi-talented human being. He's my keyboard player at the minute and he and his band are actually coming out with their first song in a few weeks or months. I don't actually know [laughs]. They've had their album done for a while, and it's one to watch. They're a great band. They're just really, really good. They're called Soft Launch.

Okay, well, thank you so much. This has been awesome. I can't wait for everyone else to listen to the album! Thanks so much. I'm glad you enjoyed the album.

What Happened to the Beach? is out now.

Interview **Kendall Saretsky**
Photography **Garry Jones**
Styling **Ben Carnall**
Hair **Chad Maxwell**
Location **Bloomsbury Lanes, London**

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