Hozier: Debut Album Out Today

Tuesday 7 October, 2014

OUT TODAY

Label: Rubyworks/Island Records

Hozier releases his debut, eponymous album on 6th October 2014 through Rubyworks/Island Records. It is preceded by a new single, Take Me To Church, on the 15th September 2014.

LIVE DATES
Wednesday 12th November – Manchester, Ritz
Sunday 16th November – Glasgow, O2 ABC
Saturday 31st January – London, Shepherd's Bush

It is only when you stumble across a songwriter whose lyrics both sound and read like poetry that you realise just what you are missing out on the rest of the time. When those lyrics are set to music that balances burning indignation with lilting tenderness, and delivered in a voice imbued with the spiritual passion and yearning of gospel and the blues, you figure you've chanced upon something pretty special. And so it is with Andrew Hozier-Byrne, a County Wicklow singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist who goes by the name of Hozier, and whose way with words is a blessing (for us) as much as his susceptibility to romance, and romantic dreaming, sounds like a curse (for him). The vividness of his imagery speaks of a soul in thrall to, and beset by, intense and sometimes ungovernable emotions. Well, Amen to that, if it produces music as visceral as the material the 23-year-old writes.

Raised in a musical family, and briefly a student of music at Trinity College Dublin (before his compulsion to write songs and share them with the world won the day over his studies), Hozier's childhood and adolescent listening was dominated, he says, by his father's record collection but particularly "by Chicago blues, Texan blues, Chess Records, Motown, and then I discovered jazz, but more importantly, Delta blues – that extraordinarily haunting sound, Skip James, Blind Willie Johnson, people like that. Later, it was Pink Floyd, Nina Simone, Billie Holiday, plus Tom Waits was a huge, huge influence. I was always drawn to singers with something haunting about their voices. The same goes for writers such as James Joyce and Oscar Wilde. You can't define what it is, but it buries itself deep in your soul."

Not surprisingly, lyrics matter hugely to Hozier. "For me, they are one of, if not the most, important factors in a song. That's where the story is, and where the writer is, or should be. Lyrics are still the thing I take the longest over in my own songs, and work the hardest at – and care the most about. And also the thing I feel the most self-conscious about; you know, 'Am I saying something worthwhile here?'"

Reaction to the release last autumn in Ireland of Take Me to Church (released in the UK as a single on 15th September 2014), demonstrated that the answer to that question was an unqualified 'Yes'. The fire-and-brimstone track – with an incendiary video to accompany it (6 million views and counting), directed by Brendan Canty and interlacing a storyline in which a homophobic lynch mob hunts down two gay men with footage of demonstrators in Russia protesting about president Putin's recent anti-gay legislation – made a point that is not only worthwhile but, for Hozier, crucial. "The song was born of this idea that a child, when it is born, is born into sin. So, before you are a woman, or a gay man, just as a person, you are being undermined by the Catholic church as somebody who is sinful, as somebody who should be ashamed of yourself, and be begging for forgiveness. I wanted to use sex as a celebration of life; there are few things as human as the act of making love."

Although his parents are Catholic, Hozier was not raised in the Church. "My mum was brought up in that culture but was very opposed to it. I have some very strong opinions about its doctrine; in Ireland there has been a huge amount of abuse – of power, of women, of children. It's a poisonous organisation. I wasn't affected by it as a child, but as you get older, you become more and more aware of the hypocrisy, of the attitudes to women, of the homophobia."

On Take Me to Church, Hozier answered back, with a song about sexuality, freedom and humanity, whose lyrics capture the beguiling mix of conviction and mischief that so characterises his approach to songwriting. Elsewhere on the EP, he looked back on his first, crushing love affair, detailing it both as nostalgic chronicler and as if he was still within the relationship. It's a devastating device: as the listener, you are witnessing his pain, his retrospective jealousy and his ongoing rapture, in the space of one song. So, on the pastoral, finger-picked Like Real People Do, as he sings: "Why were you digging? What did you bury, before those hands pulled me from the earth?", we remember the potential for torment in

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speculating about a lover's past. Cherry Wine, recorded on the roof of an abandoned hotel near Hozier's home as the sun was rising, is similarly conflicted. "Calls of 'Guilty' thrown at me, all while she stains the sheets of some other" is a line shot through with anguish, and yet, musically, the song is as delicate and lulling as a warm summer breeze – a breeze that blows in the audible sound of the dawn chorus, enlisted as unwitting backing vocalist on the song.

It is this constant contrast in Hozier's work, between the sentiments expressed by the words and the music, that most sets him apart. Endearingly, he seems to have little sense of the power of what he writes. Rather, he wrestles, perpetually, with doubt, and with dilemmas. Respite only comes, he says, when he has just written a new song. "Love, and the loss of it, is something I'm still trying to get my head around – what it does to your identity, and what it means when it's over. It begs the question, 'Who are you?', when it's done. Are you the person you felt you were at the time, or the person you felt you were before that time? But at least I'm in the position where I can clear something off myself when that happens. Plus, when you write a song, it's a hell of a lot easier to write the next one, because you can't move on from something until you've dumped it onto somebody else, if that makes sense. The path is suddenly clearer."

From Eden, the title track from Hozier's debut UK EP was written in one of those moments. "I'll slither here from Eden," he sings, "just to sit outside your door", later picturing the object of his love with "a rope in hand, for your other man to hang from a tree." Again, there is the sense of someone unable to decide, knowing the dangers, but drawn helplessly towards the rocks. Again, too, the music begs to differ; there is no torment here, as distant gospel voices join staccato jazz guitar, sonorous piano and rumbling bass in a spirit of celebration that speaks to one strand in the lyrics, but completely ignores the other. The effect of this duality is exhilarating.

If he could just still that voice in his head, counselling caution one minute and wild abandon the next, Hozier might find some peace. But then he'd stop writing songs – and we'd stop being able to hear them. It seems a terribly cruel thing to say, but for our great benefit, if not for his, long may those fires rage.

Hozier headlines a sold-out London Koko on 17th September 2014
Tracklisting: Take Me To Church/Angel Of Small Death And The Codeine Scene/Jackie And Wilson/Someone New/To Be Alone/From Eden/In A Week (Feat. Karen Cowley)/Sedated/work Song/Like Real People Do/It Will Come Back/Foreigner's God/Cherry Wine

Ends

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