

YELLOW DAYS BIOGRAPHY ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

"The older I get, the less I know about the world"
Daylight Miracles

George van den Broek's mercurial talent has long been the talk of contemporary music. An overnight sensation when 2016 debut E.P Harmless Melodies touched a nerve with a global audience of millennials, he signed a worldwide deal with Sony while most teenagers' biggest challenge would be surviving Freshers' Week.

Subsequent sonic excursions have seen him explore everything from sprawling pop fusion (Sony debut A Day In A Yellow Beat) to sci-fi conceptualism (2024's Hotel Heaven) -complete with themed global tour.

His latest release as Yellow Days, 'Rock And A Hard Place', however, sees George — newly married and drug-free — returning to the influences which inspired him to start making music in his parents' garden shed in Haslemere, Surrey, as a wide-eyed 16-year-old.

"It's a return to innocence," he says with a smile. "As a teenager I didn't know what I wanted to do, musically. As time goes by, you lose a bit of passion and edge. It's easy to get carried away. I've been like a disobedient dog that needed training (laughs). I see this as the first adult album I've ever done."

The pathway to this sonic breakthrough wasn't straightforward. Having started work on a collection of tunes stashed in his own personal 'song bank' at home in Brick Lane, George's focus quickly became clouded by the usual deluge of conflicting ideas. "I was bouncing between these different projects but subconsciously it was such tapestry of self-doubt," he recalls. "So many different threads and colours. I was going through a kind of mind-cramp. A debilitating state. I was living a certain kind of lifestyle where I would have these moments of clarity, then wake up with a terrible comedown and not do anything about it. This feels like the first time I've done what I should be doing. Which is putting the focus on the singing, the playing and the songwriting."

Added impetus was provided by that most old-fashioned of stimuli — a strict deadline. "I was actually very grateful when the label said the album had to be made very quickly. It was a very fast turnaround. Conception to completion was a month-and-a-half from beginning to end. Much quicker than anything I have ever done before."

Realising that — unlike with Hotel Heaven — he needed the help of other musicians to bring his vision to life, the singer turned to Newcastle-based jazz fusion band Knats (Stan Woodward, King David-Ike Elechi and Ferg Kilsby). The newly configured band, with brass arrangements by Otto Kampa, guitar from Al Finch and Jesse Doniach's keys — with George on vocals — instantly clicked, cutting five tracks ('Special Kind Of Woman', 'Let Me Down Easy', 'Sharon', 'Baby I'm For Real' and 'I Cannot Believe In Tomorrow') totally live in just four days at Konk Studios in Crouch End.

This kinetic energy is evident from the opening bars of a spell-binding 'Special Kind Of Woman'. "She's warm as sun, and life's just begun," croons George, like a (soul) man struck down by Cupid's arrow on the hottest day of the year. While the guiding spirit of American soul and funk is ever-present throughout the 14 tracks — there are echoes of everyone from Otis Redding to Bootsy Collins; James Brown to George Clinton — they are instantly recognisable as Yellow Days originals thanks to van den Broek's unique voice.

A relentless 'Glitter & Gold' sees him channel Plastic Ono Band-era Lennon over a sizzling Stevie Wonder-style groove, while a titanic 'Love Is Getting Complicated' is a brass-heavy mash-up of Michael Jackson's 'Off The Wall' with a red-blooded vocal worthy of van den Broek's idol, Ray Charles. 'I Cannot Believe In Tomorrow', meanwhile, is an electrifying funk-out worthy of Pieces Of A Man-era Gil Scott Heron.

"There's a definite masculinity to this record," he explains. "Not in an Andrew Tate way. Singers like Ray Charles, Otis Redding and Muddy Waters had this visceral quality. There's strength in being able to show vulnerability."

As you'd expect from a songwriter versed in tapping into the heart's inner Morse code, Rock And A Hard Place also comes with an emotional wisdom almost entirely lacking in contemporary music. Opening instrumental 'Roadkill' uses the death of a bird as a metaphor for van den Broek's own metamorphosis as an artist, while 'Daylight Miracles' addresses the existential wonders of everyday life.

'Worried I'll Break Your Heart' examines the responsibilities which come with moving into a different stage of life. "It's a song about the way someone depends on you emotionally and the fear of messing it up."

Stand-out 'California' is a poignant farewell to his party lifestyle, while a final 'You Didn't Leave Me' is a something-in-my eye paean to love's ability to endure, and a tacit message to the girl who has stuck with him since he was 16. "Modern pop music is very confessional, but most of the time it seems to be for shock value," he says. "I find it a bit crass — grief fetishism. There is so much more value in a song which gradually reveals itself to you, where everything isn't on the surface."

As any fan knows, this wouldn't be Yellow Days without the album having a strong visual theme. A first glimpse of this comes with the film noir-inspired promo clip for 'Sharon', featuring a bearded van den Broek as a big-band leader who has seemingly stepped straight off the set of Casablanca. "We had this idea of 'era confusion' for the video," he explains. "Everything jumbled up. So a mash-up of a '40s big band on a '60s TV show, but with young, modern faces. It's a metaphor for the way genre works these days, the fact that everything is a big meeting pot of eras and styles that we just call 'Alternative'.

It's this combination of cultural insight and an ability to rake over the emotional ashes which makes van den Broek so special. "The common thread throughout the album is of not wanting to let anyone down, be it partners or friends," he says in conclusion. "I want people to be proud of me."

Beautifully sung, brilliantly played and almost glowing with intelligence, Rock And A Hard Place is the sound of Yellow Days coming of age.