

The new Hercules and Love Affair album, ‘Omnion’, is a vital step forward and sideways from what came

before. The band, renowned for their killer disco-tech sound on stage and record, will cause ripples with

these eleven songs that sparkle with faith and tolerance as a response to our troubling times.

Take a deep breath… you might even call it a concept album.

“Sometimes songs are born out of an intense moment that has nothing to do with club music,” explains

Hercules main man Andy Butler. “The last album, ‘The Feast of the Broken Heart’, was a celebration of the dance floor but I’m not just a techno-head, a disco-head who just wants four-to-the-floor. I was always just as touched (if not more) by Sinead O'Connor singing about change with ‘Feels So Different’ ;or Kate Bush singing artfully about the effects of war in ‘Army Dreamers’; or Nina Simone singing her devastating version of ‘Strange Fruit’.”

Thus Hercules’s fourth album sallies forth into new territory, representing a new-found engagement with

the world. Butler is assisted on his mission by a world class cast of singers, including The Horrors’ Faris

Badwan, Lebanese rockers Mashrou’ Leila, New York singer-songwriter Sharon Van Etten, and Icelandic

sister act Sísý Ey, as well as regular collaborators Rouge Mary and Gustaph. Then there’s ‘Fools Wear

Crowns’, a deliciously spacey electro ballad with the chorus “Allow me to raise my hand and admit what a

fool I am”, sung by Butler himself.

“I tried to pass it to one of the others to sing,” he laughs, “but they heard it and said, ‘We’re not singing that, it’s so insanely personal, there’s no sense in anyone singing it but you.’ It’s literally an apology, an attempt at amends. A few years back I was in the grip of a brutal drug addiction that saw me overdosed in hospital every weekend. I was really decimated. My family said they couldn’t be around me anymore unless I spent a long haul in rehab, but at the height of my addiction I went to Europe and didn’t talk to them for over a year. My mother and my sister were in tears the moment I played them that song.”

Butler has now been clean for almost 4 years and ‘Omnion’ is rich with his re-immersion in the wider world, in all its ugliness and beauty. It’s been a long time coming. From an early age he had “a massive, massive relationship with drugs and clubs”. Originally from Denver, where he cut his teeth as a teenage DJ sneaking into clubs, he escaped to New York in 1996, the original wild gay nightworld, and invented Hercules & Love Affair as an outlet for his songs. From the retro-futurist Paradise Garage grooves of Hercules’s eponymous 2008 debut, featuring his longtime friend ANOHNI on the classic, 'Blind', to the thoughtful elegiac songwriting of 2011’s ‘Blue Songs’, to the bumping, grittier pulse of 2014’s ‘The Feast of the Broken Heart’ (with John Grant on stand-out song ‘I Try to Talk to You’), Butler has nailed a body of work that bridges the dance floor and home listening. ‘Omnion’ moves his game up a notch.

The opening title track is, Andy says, “a child’s perception of what a god would be – it says, ‘I’m small, I need help, is there some guidance?’” It’s also a quietly triumphant sliver of tuneful electronic pop, highlighting the sweet vocals of Sharon Van Etten whose song, ‘Not Myself’, a wrenching reaction to Orlando’s Pulse Club massacre, Butler remixed, spending much of the studio time in tears.

Another very different highlight of the album, taking things back to the dance floor, is the upbeat, gritty

drum machine disco stomper ‘Rejoice’, featuring Hercules regular Rouge Mary. Upon its mention Andy

Butler reminisces about how he first came across him/her backstage at the Moulin Rouge in Paris five years ago, wearing a long black trench coat and shades, “looking like Fields of the Nephilim”; how they bonded and worked together; how Rouge, “a gender non-conformist” of Algerian heritage once found shelter in a church, finding his/her musical voice there, and how, after Andy’s life was shattered by drugs, Rouge played a key role in his carrying on, rebuilding his life. Cause to rejoice, indeed!

Rouge Mary also appears on ‘Are You Still Certain?’, exchanging verses in Arabic with Hamed Sinno, the openly gay singer of Lebanese indie-rock outfit Mashrou’ Leila. The conversation between Butler and Sinno really took hold while exchanging consolations after the Paris Bataclan attacks and the double suicide bombings in Beirut the next day, which killed 40 but received much less media attention.

“The idea of the shadowy, dangerous Muslim has been around for much of my life,” sighs Andy, “After

those bombings Hamed and I chatted at length, and it cemented my hunch that I had a lot to learn from

him and this collaboration. I really wanted to get perspective amid a lot of fear-mongering. I bought books

about Islam and Islamophobia. Hamed and I, a few months later, were sitting in the studio, dealing with

notions of spirituality. The lyrics for that song say, in Arabic essentially ‘You, who say you know the truth,

how is the truth working for you? Are you still certain?’. For a lot of people, faith and belief are causing so

many problems, so much so that there is more of stigma around believing than the alternative. Yes, there is the argument that “faith" does compel people to fly planes into buildings and blow themselves up in the

middle of markets, but real faith also brings people together to greet each other in peace on a weekly

basis, to listen to age old truths and lessons that run parallel in many cultures, and prompt sincere self

reflection in a lot of individuals. Working with Mashrou' Leila was an amazing process, as they are a band of brothers from different backgrounds, willing to share a bit of themselves and their varying cultures with me. I went to the Lebanon and took something of a back seat and learn.”

Andy admits that he’s become “hypersensitive to stuff going on around” and the song ‘Lies’ is a response

to “the way we’re fed misinformation, a human response to all of this programming”. It’s also a twinkling

robot-pop slowie, owing a sonic debt to early OMD and featuring another Hercules regular, Gustaph.

Beside all these odes to spirituality it would appear ‘Controller’, featuring Faris Badwan, is the album’s

seamy ‘80s electro-house underbelly, with a sub-dom, master-and-servant thing going on in the lyrics.

“That’s a fair assessment,” Andy agrees, “but actually the song unfolded out of an unconscious process. It’sabout being used by a higher entity but there’s this second layer which is a play on sexual roleplay!”

It’s no surprise, then, that the smart, soulful, hook-filled ‘Running’, featuring the intermingled voices of

Icelandic sisters Elin, Elisabet and Sigga Eyþórsdóttir (AKA Sísý Ey), is not just a vacuous pop song but a

snappy meditation of what it might feel like to be a refugee, cast asunder by world events. Then, naturally,

‘Omnion’ needs an ending fitting its sense of purpose. ‘Epilogue’ is an electronic prayer for the future, sung by an eight-piece girls’ choir based in the same complex as Andy’s studio in Ghent, Belgium. It’s an apt close to an album of ambitious scope, all nailed down with Butler’s usual attention to musical detail, this time with a hefty exploration of sonic landscapes, and featuring tight, tight drum programming from

Russian underground techno don Leonid Lipelis (of L.I.E.S Records).

“Dance music has left me really wanting more,” says Andy, “Sometimes the dance floor represents a

decision to avoid dialogue with the wider world, to commune with people but not really talk, but humans

need to challenge themselves and step it up. Not that everything has to be so serious but this Hercules

record is.”

He says it with a smile and, actually, you can dance to a lot of ‘Omnion’. But he does also mean it.

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