

THE EXACT OPPOSITE



Band chemistry is a strange, undefinable, intangible thing, but when it's there, it's undeniable. And it's undeniable that new duo **The Exact Opposite** have it in spades. That much is clear from the first listen of their debut album, **Skill Issue**, and only becomes more apparent the more you listen to it. It's truly a magnificent and brilliant piece of art, no exaggeration. From the moment it kicks off with '*Look At Him Go!*' – which opens the record in a flurry of angular, crunching riffs and a very real and raw sense of urgency – all the way through to final track '*Why Are You Back Again?*', it's a record that fizzes and fizzles with a very tangible chemistry. It's one that bonds these songs together to create a real album, one that should and needs to be listened to from beginning to end, the way it always used to be done, and which sounds like a band at the absolute peak of their powers. That it's just singer/guitarist Jamie Stuart and drummer/multi-instrumentalist Nigel Powell makes the depth, richness and full-bodied texture of these songs all the more impressive. "We're so excited by this project," says Stuart, "that we've already started working on the next album."

First things first, though. This record is a truly vital collection of songs that brims and overflows with the innate chemistry between them while also offering an insightful, impassioned and emotional reflection of the world today and their lives (and, by extension, the listener's) within it. But it also serves as a testament to the importance of creativity, addressing the reasons and purpose for the pair making music together while simultaneously confronting their hesitations about doing so, along with the ineluctable existential dread of mortality. While those are all recurring themes throughout the album, they're perhaps most pointed on the afore-mentioned '*Look At Him Go!*'

"When we finished that song we both just looked at each other and said 'Fucking hell, this is great!', says Powell. "There's just something about it – it's very hooky, it's got a great story, I love the lyrics and it just crackles with excitement and energy."

He's right. It does. It captures and bottles whatever that chemistry is that flows between them, as does the rest of the record. But of course, Stuart and Nigel Powell already knew they had chemistry from their time together in Oxford's Dive Dive, which they'd formed in 2001 after their other bands – Unbelievable Truth and Dustball, respectively – broke up. That said, like all of us, they're different people 20-plus years later. Not only that, but Powell and the other two members of Dive Dive have been pretty much been playing full-time as Frank Turner's backing band, The Sleeping Souls, since 2007. It means that both Dive Dive gigs and records since then have been sparse. The last album was released in 2019, and before that 2011, so that chemistry continuing into the pair's new outfit, **The Exact Opposite**, wasn't necessarily guaranteed. That said, neither were particularly surprised to find it was still there in full force when they started making this record.

"I did write one song about that whole situation," says Stuart, "but I didn't really feel any ire about it. So there was no weirdness at all when Nigel and I decided to start this band – it really did just drop straight into the same songwriting pattern we used to have back in the day."

"From my point of view, it was instant," adds Powell. "Jamie's one of those guys that I just have chemistry with, so it was very natural. My memory of how it went with Dive Dive was that it would usually start with Jamie and I – I've got loads of rehearsal tapes where Jamie would bring in an idea and he and I would play it at each other for a little while so that the feel was solid, and then the other two would come in and add their parts."

While the pair's writing method recalls the past, the 12 songs that comprise debut album were fully formed in the here and now. Tempting as it could have been for them to plunder those old rehearsal tapes for ideas and inspiration, they didn't. Instead, they crafted something entirely new out of the ether, a record that's self-aware about them starting a new band again at their age, but which also sounds remarkably fresh, exciting and invigorating.

"I remember," says Stuart, "that there was a slight false start when I was writing the lyrics to '*Look At Him Go!*'. It was about something different, but then I decided what I wanted it to be about and I've never had such a stream of lyrics. I'd never put that many different words into a song before. And I know songs about aging superheroes – which is really about the death of the hero inside you – have been done by other bands, but it was really fun. And if there is an underlying theme to the record, it is aging and wondering if it's time to call it. But it's clearly not!"

"Which I totally get," adds Powell. "I totally empathise with the lyrics of all these songs. Every day I wake up thinking 'Oh, I don't know why I'm trying to be a musician, this fucking wrinkled, old, bald twat' – and every day I pick myself up and go 'You know what? Fuck it. I'm not ready to give up, and I'm not ready to cruise.' It feels like a ridiculously remote, almost impossible ideal to get somewhere with this, but then I remind myself that I was 17 and it felt like a ridiculously remote, impossible ideal to somehow get into the music industry, and I kept at it then, and I've kept at it ever since, and fuck you all, I'm just going to keep going."

That defiance and determination manifests in every song on this album. Recorded in Johnny Greenwood from Radiohead's home studio in Oxford over the course of a month, **Skill Issue** was produced, engineered and mixed entirely by Powell ("Jamie brings the Burt Bacharach," he quips, "I bring the Trevor Horn.") and both recalls and builds on the pair's impressive musical heritage, while forging boldly forward into new territory, both lyrically and musically. That opening story of the former hero who's still fighting the good fight – actually the last song

written for the album – is immediately followed by the pulsating tones of ‘*What We Do At Night*’, which implores ‘Don’t tell us how to live our lives’ over a kind of electro-post-punk tune that’s dark and jaunty in equal measure. Elsewhere, ‘*You Made Us Proud*’ is an exercise in snarling but nuanced indie-punk, ‘*FFS*’ soars with an optimism despite the state of the world, and ‘*Battle For Progress*’ shimmers and shivers with the kind of energy that bands half their age would (and do) struggle to muster.

‘*Age Old Friends*’ ruminates on the passing of time and life without going gentle into that good night, ‘*Word To The Wise*’ is riddled with jittery, youthful energy while commenting on the drudgery of modern existence, and ‘*You Work For Us Now*’ and ‘*Why Are You Back Again?*’ end the record with a one-two double punch that truly showcases the deep and profound musical chemistry at the heart of this album and this band. That **The Exact Opposite** have made such a stirring, youthful record is proof not just that they could and can still do this despite their fears of growing older, but also that they absolutely should.

“I keep laughing at something our manager said to us,” says Stuart. “He said of all the genres of music, pop music is the most ageist. If you were a jazz band, people would go ‘These guys have matured with age’ and people would be cool with that, whereas if you’re a 20-something jazz band, people would say ‘Give them a few decades, let them come back when their beards are longer.’ I don’t know, with this, if we were proving something to ourselves, because regardless, I still would have done it anyway.”

“That’s what draws me to Jamie,” adds Powell. “It’s much more interesting being in a band with somebody who is conflicted about the idea of being in a band than being in a band with somebody who wants to be, because they end up saying more interesting things. And we’ve got an album that’s proof of that.”



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