



SONY MUSIC

NEWTON FAULKNER

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There's good reason why Brit-nominated Newton Faulkner's second album, the follow-up to 2007's million-selling, Number One, debut *Hand Built By Robots*, is called *Rebuilt By Humans*. It's the same reason he had to delay, at the last minute, its recording by two and a half months. At the start of this year the singer-songwriter broke his wrist and dislocated his entire right hand. A bad enough injury at the best of times. But if you're a guitarist – and a virtuoso finger-picking one at that – it's catastrophic.

“I'd gone on a family holiday to France,” Faulkner, 24 now, says. “I wasn't skiing because I didn't want to risk anything - I was starting the album two days after I got back. But I slipped over two feet from the front door going to a car six feet from the front door, and landed really badly. I was,” he notes with a wry grin, “the only person who ended up in hospital.”

The French doctors, used to patching up battered skiers, wanted to put Faulkner's hand in a cast for two and half months. And they told him that, when the cast eventually came off, he'd have lost a lot of movement. Neither sounded particularly appetising. Cue a flurry of phone calls to specialists back home in Britain. Faulkner learned of a new treatment using a special plate to bond the shattered bone. He would fly home immediately and have an operation the next day. Then, more fun: the French doctor told Newton he couldn't fly unless they manipulated the bone away from the nerves, and they couldn't give him a local anaesthetic while they wrenched his hand back into some semblance of its proper shape.

“It was the most painful thing I'd ever encountered,” he says, stroking the fat scar running across his wrist. But for the irrepressible Faulkner, whose good vibes and esprit de gig made songs like ‘Dream Catch Me’ and ‘I Need Something’ word-of-mouth phenomena, radio staples and festival anthems in 2007/8, even this experience gave him a buzz. “My reaction was not what I would have expected. Yeah, it was agony, but I was just impressed that that much signal could be sent to your brain in one go. Instead of screaming or crying I was going “wooooooah, that was amazing!” His healthy sense of wonder and of the ridiculous – this, after all, is a man famed for his inventive cover versions including his haunting version of Massive Attack's *Teardrop* – was, in this case, saving him from passing out from pain. Faulkner made the flight.

Back in the UK the next day his wrist was sliced open and a plate bolted to his bones using nine pins and within a matter of days Faulkner was sneakily playing guitar again, his own form of DIY physio. He was back doing what he loved. Newton Faulkner had been rebuilt by humans.

In between albums, Newton Faulkner wouldn't stop touring. He gigged right up until the end of 2008. Partly because the fans wanted him to, partly because he wanted to – Faulkner loves performing, whether in a clubs, caves, theatres, festivals or hot-air balloons (he did that, over the Swiss Alps, for a radio show).

“It's pretty hard to pick the highlights of that time,” he says. “So many weird and brilliant things happened. The travelling in itself just makes me happy, I like being in a different place every day – the challenge of picking up different bits of different languages all the time, I love it.

“I still can’t believe the hot air balloon gig actually happened. It was actually my 23rd birthday as well. I went up and did a gig in a balloon in Switzerland, my performances broken up by the sound of the pilot firing these huge blasters so we didn’t crash. Then I landed and got given a double platinum disc. Then I spent the night listening to German techno in a really weird club. A great birthday...”

He had other high times in Australia, a country that fell particularly hard for Faulkner, and in Japan. “I went out on a crazy solo mission in Tokyo. I was there with one other guy who got food poisoning. And I was like, I am not going to bed in Tokyo at six in the evening. So I went out on my own, I got back at half ten the next day, completely smashed. I had no idea how I got home! I was adopted by the staff of one of bars I went to, they dragged me all over town. I have so many weird fragmented memories. Like singing [Iron Maiden’s] ‘Bring Your Daughter To The Slaughter’ at nine in the morning, drinking apple sours.”

All this “running round the world like a lunatic” – he’d even been touring throughout the recording of the first album – meant that, in a way, Faulkner missed out on the ‘Dream Catch Me’s huge UK chart success. “Then I came back for a festival in Britain and couldn’t believe that people knew all the words, not only to that song but to everything. That was the point I realised things were really working.”

Buoyed by radio play, Hand Built By Robots had become that rare and precious thing: a word of mouth phenomenon. “There was so little hype about the first album. There were loads of artists coming out at the same time, and I saw them everywhere... And then there was me”.

But as the album sales and tours rolled onwards, he began thinking: when was he going to find time get back in the studio?

There was another issue, too. As he cheerfully admits, “I completely tricked myself into thinking I’d been writing for two years. There was even a meeting booked with the record company last summer which I didn’t panic about ‘cause I was convinced I had loads of stuff. Then at this meeting I realised I had loads of ideas but nothing was finished. I was thrown into bit of a panic-y spin. But it was brilliant – it really fired me up.”

Almost immediately, some of those embryonic ideas burst into colourful life. One of the earliest songs was ‘If This Is It’, Faulkner’s euphoric hymn to the joys of gigging. In an album chocka with instant-hit melodies, it was an obvious choice for the first single. “You could apply the sentiment to anything you really love doing, but I very much aimed it at gigs. It’s that feeling I have: ‘this is what I wanna do! This is cool!’ It’s about how brilliant it is communicating with lots of people, and how it can feel. And when people know the song it will take on a new form onstage. I can’t wait for that.”

He wrote ‘If This Is It’ in a basement flat behind Harrods in Knightsbridge – a location chosen precisely because he knew no one who lived round there, and because he had no interest in going out in the posho London ‘hood. He applied the same purposefully limiting logic to the recording process – much of ‘Rebuilt By Humans’ was recorded in a tiny room under the stairs at London’s Miloco studios. There was just room for Faulkner and producer Mike Spencer, and no distractions.

“Mike and I had done a couple of tracks together on the first album, and he got really excited by the ideas I had for this one, the places I wanted to take things sonically. He understood what I was aiming for with this album. And he let me experiment – I don’t think there was anything we thought of that we didn’t try. The first one was quite rushed in a way, but with this one we had time to make mistakes if we needed to.”

The recording process, he notes, “was pretty unflashy. But that helped - Miloco wasn’t somewhere we went to hang out and drink till the early hours, chatting. It was focused workspace - there was nothing in there apart from two upright chairs, a screen and speakers. That was kind of it. That gave it a certain amount of intensity that I don’t think could have existed in a bigger room.

“I was a lot more hands on this time. Mike would be editing and I’d be left noodling away on the synths till I found the sound I had in my head. Which took me a while ‘cause I had

not idea how any of the stuff worked! I did a lot with my voice too – there are a lot sounds that sound like synths that are actually me treating my voice.”

The epic ‘Won’t Let Go’, on the other hand, found Faulkner escaping the world of purposefully spartan London workspaces. It was written in a storm of brilliant distractions. “I wrote it in a hotel room in Tokyo. I was there to work with Cornelius, who I’ve loved forever. We had a writing session together, which he doesn’t normally do.” Faulkner’s fan’s enthusiasm for the Japanese producer, and the language barrier, meant there were some nervous moments in the studio. But the results are phenomenal: ‘Won’t Let Go’, propelled by driving strings and an urgent, jump around backbeat, is already a live classic, as anyone who heard it at this summer’s Glastonbury and Latitude festivals will attest. Not least because Faulkner plays the song accompanied by a tape of the backing track, which he whips out of his pocket and sticks in a cassette player.

‘I’m Not Giving Up Yet’ is another brand new live favourite. On his recent UK tour, on which he road-tested the new material and recorded ‘Rebuilt By Humans’ song interludes, Faulkner ended his set with the largely acoustic and wholly electrifying ballad. His voice has never sounded better.

There’s more vocal inventiveness on the beautiful, heartfelt ‘Resin On My Heart Strings’ (“you put resin on my heartstrings, you make ‘em sing”), in which Newton’s voice is made to sound like a theramin resulting in what his producer calls “a faceless choir”. The album opens, meanwhile, with the irresistible funky groove of ‘Badman’, which Faulkner wrote with his brother. ‘Over and Out’ meanwhile is a soaring song that reminds us that not only is he a supremely talented musician, but a truly powerful and skilled vocalist to boot.

Newton Faulkner, a man with a purist’s love of music and a burning desire to share his songs with people, didn’t want to go down any of the obvious routes for his second album. For all his alchemical brilliance on the guitar, Newton wanted to bring more sonic colours to his palette: listen out for dexterous use of synths, strings, and that bass melodica specially imported from America. Listen, too, for ‘Been Thinking About It’, a gentle acoustic folk song that was recorded entirely live.

And watch out, on his coming tour, for inventive, tech-savvy ways of triggering and presenting some of the backing tracks crafted in the studio for these big, bold new songs... And, finally, this people’s poet and have-guitar-will-travel troubadour wanted Rebuilt By Humans to do something special.

“I wanted to avoid the classic second album thing of complaining about how great things have gone and all the hard work,” says Faulkner. Even the agony of his injury, and the slow recovery process, turned out in his favour – the delay meant he could write a few more killer songs, including ‘Badman’ and sun-flecked, rootsy ‘Lipstick Jungle’. “I’ve had a really great couple of years and if it was suddenly to grind to a halt, I wouldn’t have any regrets whatsoever,” he continues. “I had brilliant fun making this album, and hopefully it sounds that way. That’s another reason why ‘If This Is It’ is great for the first single: hopefully it comes across as quite grateful. Because I am grateful.”

Thanks to the fans, and to the doctors, Newton Faulkner is back. He may be part metal these days. But he’s all heart, and all tunes.

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