

FICTION PLANE

Left Side of the Brain

If, lyrically, Fiction Plane's second full-length, *Left Side of the Brain*, covers themes as varied as the anguishing death of a loved one, war and nepotism, musically the disc marks the group's rebirth, or rather, the rise of a whole new band.

Produced by Paul Corkett (Radiohead, Björk, Tori Amos), it is the formal debut of the band as a three piece—Joe Sumner on bass and vocals, Seton Daunt on guitar and Pete Wilhoit on drums—and the first release since keyboardist/bassist Dan Brown bowed out of the group to raise a family.

While going from a quartet to a trio is definitely a rare move—many bands would take the opportunity to balloon, rather than shrink—in so doing Fiction Plane has birthed its inner rock god. While there are fewer instruments and more space in the band's songs, the group sounds larger and heavier on *Left Side of the Brain*, as the disc finds Daunt genuinely delving into the role of a soloist for the first time. "In a way, this album is about us letting it all hang out," he says. "It's a bit more bold and obnoxious, guitar wise. It's louder and prouder." "It's sort of a coming out party for us," says Wilhoit. "We sort of unleashed the animal within."

Ironically, when Sumner hunkered down in London earlier this year and began writing some new tracks for the disc, a mightier sound was the furthest thing from his mind. The band's lyricist, he "just kind of wrote for myself, which was slightly different, in a way. I took a month off in January, and I just completely pretended like there's no band, no record, no nothing, no music industry, none of that shit. I wrote for absolutely nobody else. At the time, I didn't give a shit about anyone, not even the band for most of it."

That session came after a frustrating period when the band was in label limbo, moving from major U.S. label to major U.S. label, trying to produce its second full-length album. Just before Christmas 2006, Fiction Plane became a free agent, and Sumner began playing guitar all day and all night, shutting out friends and family, while testing out material at bars in dreary London. "That was a good gauge," he says. "Without any production or anything, if you play a song at a bar and people recognize it or get into it, you're on the right track."

From that batch of songs, which included such essential tracks as "Two Sisters," Daunt, Sumner and Wilhoit rounded out an album they had been writing for some three years. Along with these songs, the band members re-approached some ideas they had been kicking around for a while and even wrote on the spot.

What emerged were tracks that talk of being in love with the wrong person and knowing it ("Cold War Symmetry"), the slow decline of a loved one ("Left Side of the Brain": "When you sit there and watch them, you can't say anything. It's almost like, 'Just die, so I can be sad, or don't die, and get better immediately.'"), alienation ("Anyone") and, as Sumner puts it, "loving too much in kind of a dirty way" (the album's first single, "Two Sisters"). "Death Machine" is about war: "I really understand the desire to protect your country, and the desire

to fight for what you believe in, but the people who are telling you what you should do in order to do that, I just don't trust them."

Nepotism, meanwhile, is at the heart of "Running the Country": "It discusses how unqualified and possibly unsuitable people can find themselves in positions of power because of who they are." It's a track that surely has relevance to the precarious position he finds himself in being the son of one of rock's biggest superstars: Sting. That lineage is one that Sumner has grappled with all his life, trying to establish himself as both his own man and his own musician.

"I spent many years lying about it, and avoiding it," he says. "Even if I took a job in a pub in the middle of nowhere, someone would figure it out." His desire to step out from that shadow loomed large in the band's decision whether or not to take the offered opener's slot on this summer's massive Police reunion tour. To be blunt, in the end, Sumner just said fuck it: "I just figured if it's gonna happen anywhere, I might as well take full advantage: I think we're ready, we've got a great band and a great single."

"The lyrics offer a real small window into Joe Sumner," says Wilhoit (the lone American in the group, which is rounded out by Brits), "one that you won't get even on a personal level. So it's an interesting way for him to have sort of group therapy for himself." Says Sumner: "I'm crap at talking, which is why I write songs."

Left Side of the Brain is Fiction Plane's debut for Bieler Bros. Records, founded by Jason and Aaron Bieler, early industry supporters of the band, who were actually involved in recording some of the band's earlier demos. "It's definitely our most honest work," says Daunt. "It was really done live with minimum overdubs, and it's definitely much more rough around the edges. There are very fat sounds, massive drums sounds." Says Wilhoit: "We're a smaller band with less constraint, so it actually sounds bigger. We kind of let loose and use a lot of dynamics."

The seed for Fiction Plane was planted in London more than a decade ago, when Sumner and Brown began conjuring Mr. Bungle and Faith No More with their first project. A few years later, Daunt was asked to join after guesting at a couple shows, where he lathered some needed atmospheric sounds over Sumner's guitar. Culling such influences as the Pixies, Radiohead and especially Nirvana, the band was without a full-time drummer until 2002, when Indiana-born Wilhoit drove 13 hours to New York and got the gig immediately following a brief audition. The chemistry was in fact so immediate that the four-piece played CBGBs two days later.

Fiction Plane formally took flight in 2003 with MCA's release of the lauded *Everything Will Never Be OK*, produced by David Kahne (Sublime, the Strokes, Regina Spektor). Propelled by the addictive, rollicking title track, the disc scored Fiction Plane tours with Lifehouse, Sting and Switchfoot. When MCA folded not long after the album's release, the band's label woes began, as it was passed around the Universal Records label system. In 2005, it issued the four-song EP *Bitter Forces and Lame Race Horses*.

After a long period of inactivity, regrouping as a trio and recording *Left Side of the Brain* was like going "Zero to 60 in 3.5 seconds," says Wilhoit.

In a word, the new record and line-up are quite simple "good," says Sumner: "It's fucking good," he says, laughing, at his inability to pick a better word. "It's the closest we've ever been to what we want to be. We're just ready to destroy and work as hard as we possibly can."