



## HUG of THUNDER

Michael Hann 15/4/2017

“I don’t want to go out there being presumptuous,” Kevin Drew says, “because, I’ve worn those presumptuous shoes before, and you don’t want it to feel like, ‘Oh, what a let-down.’” That’s the fear when you bring back one of music’s most beloved names seven years after their last album. But with *Hug of Thunder*, the fifth Broken Social Scene album, Drew and his bandmates have a right to feel presumptuous.

They have that right because they have created one of 2017’s most sparkling, multi-faceted albums. On *Hug of Thunder* the 15 members of Broken Social Scene – well, the 15 who play on the record, including returnees Leslie Feist and Emily Haines – refract their varying emotions, methods and techniques into something that doesn’t just equal their other albums, but surpasses them. It is righteous but warm, angry but loving, melodic but uncompromising. The title track on its own might just be the best thing you will hear all year – a song that will become as beloved as “Anthems For a Seventeen-Year-Old Girl” from their breakthrough album, *You Forgot It In People*.

Its title, Drew says, captured what he wanted people to feel about the group’s comeback, and how they sound playing together again: “It’s just such a wonderful sentiment about us, coming in like a hug of thunder.”

Broken Social Scene had reconvened, in varying forms, several times over the past four years – the odd festival show here and there, preferably ones that involved the least possible travelling. But the idea that they might turn their hand to something more than greatest-hits sets had been stirring since November 2014, when producer Joe Chiccarelli told Drew the group needed to make a new album.

“He started showing up at our label, asking if we were going to make an album,” Drew recalls. “He just didn’t give up; he just kept saying, ‘You’ve got to strike, you’ve got to do this, the time is now,’ and so finally we agreed.”

As might be expected to be the case with a many-headed hydra of a group, getting all the principals to agree wasn’t easy. Drew’s co-founder Brendan Canning was keen, but Drew and fellow BSS lifer Charles Spearin took more persuading. A turning point for Drew came with the Paris terror attacks of November 2015, which made him feel the world needed an

injection of positivity: “It just sort of made us want to go out there and play. Because I think we’ve always been a band that’s been a celebration.”

Canning picks up the story: “By autumn of 2015 we had started getting together and trying some ideas out, just getting back in that jam space, in Charles’ garage. Then we set up shop in my living room and we were starting to come together in a very familiar kind of way, jamming in the living room, eating meals in the kitchen together, because that’s what the band is about: ‘Hey, let’s all get on the same page and get the energies flowing in the same direction.’”

Recording finally began in April 2016 at The Bathhouse studio on the shores of Lake Ontario, with later sessions in Toronto and Montreal, before the group went right back to basics. “It was very beautiful the way that it ended in Charlie’s little rehearsal garage space,” Drew says, “after going to all these studios. We just worked there, doing back-up vocals and handclaps and all the shit we used to do when we were younger.” And then it was to Los Angeles, where the album was mixed.

The result is a panoramic, expansive album, 53 minutes that manages to be both epic and intimate. In troubled times it offers a serotonin rush of positivity: “Stay Happy” lives up to its title, with huge surges of brass that sound like sunshine bursting through clouds. “Gonna Get Better” makes a promise that the album is determined to deliver. That’s not to say it’s an escapist record: Broken Social Scene are completely engaged, wholly focussed, and not ignoring the darkness that lurks outside. But there is no hectoring, no lecturing, but a recognition of the confusion and ambiguity of the world. As the title track closes with Leslie Feist murmuring “There was a military base across the street,” the listener is caught in the division between the notional security provided by national defence, and the menace of the same thing.

The gestation of *Hug of Thunder* was no idyll. When *You Forgot It in People* made their name, Broken Social Scene were young men and women. Fifteen years on, they were adults in or on the cusp of middle age, and – as Drew puts it – “all the adult problems in the world were happening around us individually, whether it was divorce or cancer”. Three members of the band lost their fathers while the album was being recorded, “and it seemed like the days of going in the studio, getting stoned, drinking five beers and saying, ‘Who gives a fuck?’ were over”.

Then there’s the fact of the size of the ensemble, and the number of competing voices. “You don’t always get the final say with Broken Social Scene,” Canning says, with a certain degree of understatement. He compares the process of getting everyone to agree on a song to party politics: “It’s like you’re trying to get a bill passed through the House – you have to be really committed to wanting to win.”

But, still, if they were to return, it had to be with everybody, no matter if that meant things might get unwieldy. “I’d like to believe that Broken Social Scene can be whatever it can be,” Canning says, “but I think the fact we’d gone away for so long meant we really, we really couldn’t have done the same thing without everyone involved, you know?” The story of

Broken Social Scene, he insists, was built on the involvement of everyone, and so if the story was to be continued, those same people had to return.

“The thing that has changed is that the relationships between us are established,” Drew suggests. “And in a family, you ebb and flow and you come and you go and you’re in love and then you’re annoyed – but it’s established now, the relationships aren’t going anywhere, you know? And I think through time, because we’ve been through so much together, personally and professionally, when we’re all on stage, everybody knows what they’re doing, everybody has a melody to back up someone else, you feel supported, you’re a crew, there’s nothing but protection all around you.”

Canning picks up the theme: “Before we were making this record, I said to everyone: ‘We all basically want the same thing, we might just have slightly different road-maps on how to get there. So how do we stray off on certain country roads but get back onto the main thoroughfare?’”

That Broken Social Scene were a family again, driving along the same main road, became apparent to UK fans in September 2016, when the group – with Ariel Engle the latest woman to assume the role of co-lead vocalist – came over for less than a handful of festival shows, to test the waters. Their Sunday teatime appearance at End Of The Road – an ecstatic hour of maximalist music, physically and emotionally overwhelming – ended up being one of the biggest hits of the festival. It achieved what Drew has always felt music needed to do: it created transcendence, a pocket of time where everyone present was living only in the moment.

“My 11 year old nephew asked me, ‘Uncle Kev, why do adults get drunk?’ and I looked at him and thought, ‘OK, brilliant question, I’m going to give a brilliant answer,’” Drew recalls. “And I looked at him for about 10 seconds and I said, ‘Because they want to feel like you. Because they want to feel like a kid again, they want to forget everything, they want to be innocent.’ We are built in a way now where you can’t do that, because you’re walking around with the anti-transcendence box in your pocket, and in your hand, and in your home, and on your bedside table: it’s the anti-transcendence. It’s called your phone! And we’re getting killed, we’re getting killed!”

So what do Broken Social Scene want listeners to take from *Hug of Thunder*? Canning wants it to make them “pause for the cause and maybe just leave things in your life alone for 53 minutes”. For Drew, it’s about what it’s always been about: making the connection. “I just hope they understand that there’s others out there, that they’re not alone,” he says. “I know that’s silly! But you’d be surprised how many times I’ve had to tell people, ‘Hey, you’re not alone on this, you’re not alone thinking these things.’ I mean, with the title *Hug of Thunder*, I want to hold people. I want to fucking hold them. And when we do shows, I’m not: ‘Look at me, I’m elevated up on the stage,’ It’s: ‘We’re here with you, this is us together.’ Broken Social Scene is about the people, and it’s always been about the people.”