

Sitting on a sterling throne

Silverchair mastermind Daniel Johns battles laryngitis, discusses living in the past, his phenomenal new album, and the land down under by **Ryan A. Bunch**

Still known to most Americans for the mid-'90s hit "Tomorrow," Silverchair released its fifth studio album on July 24, officially certifying the groups as Australia's most successful band of all time, with five consecutive records all going to number one. While Americans are still trying to re-live the days of flannel, Silverchair has spent the last decade making the most sophisticated rock music to emerge from the grunge era. Suffering from well-publicized bouts with anorexia and arthritis into the early part of the millennium, the troubled maestro Johns is healthier than ever, and writing his best music yet.

A mild-mannered, polite Aussie who speaks openly about his past, Johns is looking healthier than ever (though he's recovering from laryngitis when we speak) and seems poised to take his throne as a major musical talent. Here are a few highlights from our chat, for the full conversation, visit www.toledocitypaper.com.

What I like about "Young Modern" is there are a lot of sounds we haven't heard from Silverchair before, you're pushing your voice in different ways. Where did those sounds come from?

I moved to London with my wife (Natalie Imbruglia) and every day I was writing; I had a little studio. I had about 50-60 songs written. Then we started playing together as a band again and I picked the 15 I thought would be best for Silverchair. "Diorama" was a really conceptual, progressive record. This record, I wanted it to be like a single White Album or a Bowie record, where it's a bunch of ideas and songs, cohesive but also all over the place.

Was there a moment when you thought you wouldn't be able to make music again? (Johns suffered from a rare but serious arthritic condition in 2002). Post-"Diorama" I was in the hospital in a wheelchair, I couldn't move. I couldn't walk, I couldn't move my left arm or left hand. There was definitely a moment when I didn't think I'd play guitar again. I used to sing melodies into my Dictaphone and hope that I got better so I could figure out how to play them on the guitar. That was a pretty depressing time. I think it really inspired the level of optimism present on this record. I felt really lucky, like I had been given a second chance. I wanted to do something interesting and enjoyable. Something that was really pop without being stupidly commercial. I wanted it to be the most ambitious record we've released and the most accessible.

Most people know Silverchair as the band that recorded "Tomorrow" even though that was 12 years ago. What do you think when you hear that music?

I feel a little bit awkward. I'm really aware that we're known by a lot of people as 'the band with the frog on the cover.' But, I'm still proud of it, that's how I wrote when I was 15. Though, I don't think anyone is overly proud of work they've done at 13 or 14. I had no idea what I was doing. We don't play any songs off the first record live anymore, I can't relate to it. But I'm not embarrassed by it; I'd just prefer people knew more about Silverchair.

I think it surprised people when "Neon Ballroom" added orchestral work to the band, how did you decide you wanted to bring that element into the music?

It was the point when I left school. The first two albums, I was still a student and I was trying to write music that my friends would think was cool and trying to write music that wouldn't get me bashed. As soon as I left school, I stopped seeing people and became a secret anorexic. I stopped listening to rock 'n' roll music and started focusing on film and electronic music. That's when I started thinking outside the box. I stopped trying to be a rock 'n' roll band and started to think about writing music as opposed to songs.

You made an interesting comment that the American music scene is almost sports-like with competition.

I definitely feel like that, it wasn't a dis on the American scene at all, there's a lot of amazing American bands. I've just noticed coming from Australia that you don't hear many American bands talking up another band. In Australia, everyone is friends and supports each other. Of course there's exceptions, there are bands that Australians hate, and rivalries. But, in general, I think people tend to be more patriotic and try and support Australian bands because we're all under dogs.

Silverchair and Toledo's We Are The Fury play a sold-out show at St. Andrew's Hall, Detroit on Fri., Aug 3. In the meantime, buy "Young Modern," from your favorite local retailer. www.myspace.com/silverchair.



Left: Johns struts a surprisingly healthy frame.

Below: Silverchair celebrates its latest release with brand new mustaches

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