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Damien Rice: Fading Back

November 11, 2014

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<http://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2014/11/damien-rice-fading-back.html>



Flying thousands of feet in the air from Berlin, Damien Rice will soon arrive in Dublin to perform the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre, one of 15 sold-out shows that the native Irishman has scheduled to support the anticipated release of his newest album, *My Favourite Faded Fantasy*. The tour of course has not been without its setbacks. Early on Rice was forced to cut short a performance in Chicago and reschedule an appearance in Toronto the following day due to an ear infection that caused loss in his hearing. “Enthusiasm has a tendency to overshadow the body’s needs,” he says. “My body gave me signs that I should slow down, but by the time I listened it was too late and I got sick.”

Given Rice’s prolonged absence from music, a shock to the system was in many ways inevitable. Rice had first made a name for himself back in 2002 with the release of his debut album *O*. Recorded in variety of locations, including bedrooms, kitchens and even outdoors, the songwriter’s delicately intimate work slowly spread by word-of-mouth, building into a blaze that to date has resulted in over 2.5 million copies sold. Following the

release of his sophomore effort 9 in 2006 however, Rice all but disappeared from the public eye, with only a few scant live appearances to lend proof he was even interested in music anymore. Rice, known for his reticence in interviews, is guarded describing the eight years he spent between albums.

“It takes time to stretch the mind open after having built a load of tall walls,” he says. “I was resting, and once rested I challenged myself to do things that I was afraid of doing, to say things I was afraid of saying. Whatever I feared I pushed myself to experience. Once I faced those things I was afraid of, the fear disappeared. My list of fears was long and it took many years to tick off. One very simple thing, though very difficult to do, was saying sorry to someone.”

The someone Rice alludes to is undoubtedly Lisa Hannigan, who for years served as his foil both professionally and romantically before their relationship came to a bitter and devastating end in the aftermath of recording 9, which was itself plagued by Rice’s own increasing unhappiness, creative frustration and disenchantment with the success and pressure that O had place upon him.

Apologizing to the former partner and collaborator who had been such an integral part of his life helped provide, in part, a “proper scrubbing” of his own guilt-ridden slate, allowing Rice to move forward. Though he had collected a number of demos over the years since 9, it wasn’t until Rice enlisted the assistance of producer Rick Rubin in early 2013 that his recording efforts really started to creatively coalesce. Laying down tracks in Malibu and finishing in Reykjavik, Iceland, “Rick helped me to put away the self-critical whip,” Rice says. “He helped me to get out of my own way. I had spent years beating myself up, and Rick has a masterful skill at pulling you out of you.”

The resulting eight tracks of My Favourite Faded Fantasy comprise a beautifully orchestrated, vulnerable work, swelling with lamentation and resignation, and the feeling that experience, no matter how emotionally brutal, contributes to our own betterment. Describing the person inside the record as “a student with a lot to unlearn” Rice says his return has been reinvigorating. Not wanting to wait another eight years, he is happy to have his appetite back after such a long fast, and he already has plans to return to the studio as soon as he’s able.

“Writing songs and playing music has a great way of keeping you in check, at least to me,” Rice says. “I get reminded, over and over, that I am not in charge. The more I let go, the more it gives back. The more I follow the flow, the bigger the surprise of the outcome.”

For Rice, My Favourite Faded Fantasy accomplishes many things, perhaps most important among them the chance to let go, to simply keep his eyes on what’s ahead. “We all have challenges in life. Great challenges often provide great lessons. Moving forward with enthusiasm is far more interesting to me rather than dwelling on the past. It’s impossible to change the past...I like starting from here.”