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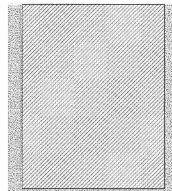
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17TH ANNUAL FESTIVAL GUIDE

SUMMER SPOTLIGHT

THE HEAD AND THE HEART

LARSON SUTTON

THE HEAD AND THE HEART could be forgiven for succumbing to some of the trappings of stardom. After all, the Seattle indie-folk favorites have graduated from Sub Pop, the premier independent imprint, to industry powerhouse Warner Bros. And the band's first single, "All We Ever Knew," from their 2016 major-label debut, *Signs of Light*, hit No. 1 on the Alternative Songs chart.

"We got a semi-truck. That, to us, is a rock-star move," says drummer Tyler Williams from his home in Richmond, Va. "It means we can carry more equipment now."

Signing on with the big leagues did, however, coincide with a more disconcerting development—the substance abuse issues that pushed founding member Josiah Johnson to a dangerous low and led to his hiatus from touring. Nonetheless, the successful *Signs of Light* features his contributions, including the poignant, album-closing title track. Williams is optimistic that Johnson will make his full-time return sooner rather than later.

"He's doing a lot better. We've started to have conversations about when he will come back," says Williams. "He got himself in a dark place creatively, physically and mentally, where we were concerned for his health. Nothing's more important than his life."

Williams says Johnson is actively writing songs for the band's next album, and he sat in during bandmate Jonathan Russell's solo show in San Francisco. Guitarist Matt Gervais, husband to the band's multi-instrumentalist, Charity Rose Thielen, has been performing in Johnson's stead. So what happens when Johnson returns to a group that is different from what it was when he left?

"We've grown a lot on this



record. We're playing a lot bigger venues," Williams says. "We're only going to be stronger if Matt stays with us and Josiah comes back as well. It's a win-win for us as a band, and we're excited to broach those topics. At the crux of the decision is what's healthy for Josiah."

The group believes that staying healthy means embracing what they see as the next logical step in their progression as artists. For a band that had always maintained a do-it-yourself ethos, right down to handmade sleeves for their self-released first album, the Warner Bros. deal was a chance to let go. Rather than shifting straight from the stage to the studio, they took a year off, writing in a variety of locales and cutting early tracks in Northern California in the living room of a Stinson Beach house.

"In our band, there's always resistance to everything," Williams says, laughing. "We

wouldn't have moved in a direction we felt we weren't ready for, or felt like this band couldn't do."

They widened their scope of influences from mainstays Fleet Foxes and Band of Horses to include Kanye West and Taylor Swift. They also extended enough trust to each other to individually choose what would be best for each member to sing and play. And, for the first time, they worked with a producer, enlisting Grammy winner Jay Joyce to take their Stinson Beach rough draft to its maximum potential.

"We love the people at Sub Pop," says Williams. "But we felt like we had done everything in that world. Let's try new ideas, other avenues."

Those other avenues led to more sweeping, panoramic latitudes on *Signs of Light*. Stacked layers of sound suggest potential anthems befitting the larger spaces that the band will inhabit on tour. When Williams

discusses the new material, he could just as easily be referring to the group itself.

"It was organic," he says. "The songs demanded it. They needed room to breathe and grow into this big sound."

This summer, The Head and the Heart will take their newfound "big sound" on the road in the States and abroad. The band still relishes its underdog role at the major festivals and will alternate appearances at Bonnaroo, Lollapalooza (Chicago and Berlin) and Newport Folk with cross-continental headlining stops, including two nights at Colorado's Red Rocks. Most of all, they're looking forward to the freedom and flow of energy in the great outdoors.

"There are no walls to keep that [energy] in," Williams says. "It's really the clearest representation of who we are as a band when we play outside."

For those missing The Head and the Heart's cozy familiarity, this past spring, the group released its *Stinson Beach Sessions*—a collection of nascent demos from the beach house. Still, Williams is quick to address the leap to a major label as part of a broader concern of artist survival.

"There's not a lot of space for bands like us in that [indie] world. It's not where we fit in anymore," he says. "To keep doing what we love—playing music for people every night—we were like, 'Let's go over here.' I'm sure we alienated some people who don't understand what it takes to try and thrive creatively, but we didn't want this thing to die. We're going to do what makes sense to keep playing music."

You can catch The Head and the Heart at Hangout, Sasquatch!, Governors Ball, Bonnaroo, Mountain Jam, Latitude, Newport Folk, Hinterland, Lollapalooza, Travelers' Rest, Lollapalooza Berlin, Golden Leaves and elsewhere.