

Wild Beasts

Tom Fleming

Benny Little

Chris Talbot

Hayden Thorpe

It starts with a simple nagging pulse, some sparse piano and Hayden Thorpe's opulent falsetto – only here he's never sounded so haunted, threading through the skeletal arrangement and ominous spaces of 'The Lion's Share' as it almost builds into a crescendo but then, brilliantly, doesn't quite, maintaining instead its eerie tension until it evaporates. "It's a terrible scare," he sings, "but that's why the dark is there: so you don't have to see what you can't bear." For a brief delirious moment there's a tiny icy blade right through your heart, and it's clear that whatever our expectations of Wild Beasts, a band who've always gone their own strange, sweet way, they are about to be both confounded and exceeded.

'**Smother**' is the third album by Wild Beasts, four young men from Kendal who, despite journeying towards the centre of things, on a trajectory that took them from Kendal to Leeds to London, still make music that retains the outsiderdom and intimacy a childhood spent in the Lake District informed. Like its predecessors 'Limbo, Panto' and the Mercury-nominated, much-loved 'Two Dancers', it is a genuinely brave, beautiful record that stands outside the vicissitudes of fashion, and sounds like nothing so much as itself. If 'Two Dancers' was a night on the tiles, dizzy and giddy and pulsing with hedonism, then '**Smother**' is pillowtalk. Intimate and sensual, it has the courage and confidence to talk softly, knowing that once it has the listener, it has them forever.

As 'Two Dancers' refined elements of 'Limbo, Panto' and veered off into uncharted territory, so '**Smother**' explores the 'erotic downbeat' first hinted at on 'Underbelly' and 'When We're Sleepy' from 'Two Dancers'. For the first time on a Wild Beasts album, there are ten love songs. Often delicate, never wimpish. Born out of an intense six week period of writing in East London and a month recording in remotest Wales, the songs make most sense in each other's company - as a suite whose full force isn't felt until the final notes die away. These ten songs reflect a band certain only of themselves. Like all the best art, it isn't second-guessing its audience. It doesn't even know if there is an audience. It's born out of a moment of vulnerability (is anyone listening?) that, conversely, brings out the singular strengths of this most singular of bands. When they say "we never wanted to be four white boys playing guitar forever; we hope to be the kind of band that shouldn't exist," then you realise '**Smother**' is the wonderful sound of four musicians being entirely true to their vision.

"All the best bands change shape," says Benny Little, and all four Beasts speak volubly of their love of Talk Talk, another British band whose gradual metamorphosis opened up extraordinary, impossible-to-predict vistas in their music. Along with Talk Talk, they've been listening to Beach House ('that record is like a hug'), Oneohtrix Point Never, Caribou's Swim. Listening to '**Smother**', you can hear what drew them to those records: atmosphere, space, understated rhythm. It's these qualities in part that make '**Smother**', as Tom Fleming says with a half-smile, "a more grown-up record. With all the perils and horrors that can bring... It's less performative and more intimate."

Hayden says 'Limbo, Panto' "sounds like a 20 year old," and as such it reflected the brash youthfulness of its makers. "We're more familiar with our dialect now." There's a sense of fluid intuition at play here, between the four musicians and de-facto fifth Beast Richard Formby, that makes listening to '**Smother**' feel like a privilege. As Hayden says while discussing Talk Talk "the best parts are unquantifiable."

Deeply personal, and as brazen in its fragility as 'Limbo, Panto' was brash and baroque, '**Smother**' is like a candle lit in the teeth of a gale. Huddle round it, draw closer, get warm.

"I have to know how it feels and I am not afraid; this is the house we built – all else falls away" Deeper

