

Royal Wood – The Burning Bright

Sometimes in order to really find yourself, you have to lose yourself. Just ask Royal Wood, whose latest record, the breathtakingly poignant *The Burning Bright*, captures his truest, most confident musical voice even as it chronicles an extraordinary year of tumult, travel and personal discovery.

The Burning Bright registers a number of firsts for Wood, whose chart-topping 2012 release, the JUNO-nominated *We Were Born to Glory*, firmly established him as one of Canada's most accomplished alt-pop singer/songwriters, producers, arrangers and multi-instrumentalists.

For one thing, *The Burning Bright* is the product of multiple worlds – a culmination of five weeks spent writing in Wood's ancestral home of Ireland, recording at home and, for the first time, in Los Angeles with Bill Lefler, himself a producing/arranging/multi-instrumentalist dynamo (see Dashboard Confessional, Gym Class Heroes, Fall Out Boy's Patrick Stump).

The record also found Wood collaborating in new ways: with Lefler and fellow Canuck singer/songwriter Simon Wilcox – with whom he wrote the sticky and wickedly buoyant first single "Forever and Ever" – with long-time guitarist/co-producer Dean Drouillard, and with the spectral voices in the hills of County Meath, where Wood withdrew in spring 2013 in the aftermath of his collapsed marriage.

The Burning Bright may scan as a breakup record; witness lyrics like "Well I once believed in a fairy-tale, now I'm holding a coffin nail," exhaled regretfully in the song "Promises" and pretty much the whole of the achingly tender "I Wish You Well." But it's actually a compass pointing forward, spinning on the honest, from-the-gut creativity that propelled Wood into music in the first place.

Yet ask Wood if the stakes felt higher for *The Burning Bright* given its emotional heft and arrival on the heels of a bona fide hit and he says, "No."

"To be honest, the stakes felt higher on the last album. This time, I finally made the decision to simply make art again for the sake of making art. It is its own reward and what happens next is just a part of the journey in making it."

And what an enlightening - if winding - journey it has been so far.

As Wood explains, *The Burning Bright* unfolded more or less in four distinct phases. Phase One: a pre-Ireland visit to L.A. where he met Lefler through Wilcox as part of a quest to write something for film or TV. The magic was immediate; so much so that, having conjured "Forever and Ever" without breaking a sweat, Wood did two more songs with Lefler and Wilcox just in case the single was dumb luck.

"At that point, Bill and I said, 'We *have* to make a record together.' Then I went off to Ireland to write" - this would be Phase Two – "and when I came back, I felt I had two... not opposing but different directions I could go in making this record. I felt like I wanted to have both of those voices heard."

It's no surprise that Wood was thinking on a grand scale, given that he crafted something like 40 songs during his ascetic Irish hideaway where being "plugged in" meant being wise to the local gossip down at the pub.

“I took long walks, visited old graveyards. It became a search through my past as well as my future. A lot of songs, like ‘City Lights’ and ‘The Light of Dawn’ came from just thinking about family. Ireland let me go home without having to go home, if you know what I mean.”

As the month of May dissolved into June, what would eventually become *The Burning Bright* entered Phase Three.

“I got together with Dean and I sat him down and asked him to produce these ideas I had. I sketched out the parameters. I said I wanted Rose Cousins to sing on it, plus Carleigh Aikins and Felicity Williams. I didn’t want to do any backing vocals myself, just the lead and the main instruments – the guitar, the piano, a little bit of banjo and ukulele.

“I also wanted horns and strings and I wanted it to all be about the song. Not tons of layers, just the song. I said, ‘That’s the record I want you to make. Now I am going to go to Los Angeles to make a totally different record with Bill,’” he chuckles, referencing what became Phase Four.

Wood continues: “For the L.A. record, I was playing the majority of instruments. Bill was playing drums but the rest is just me jumping around from bass to piano to guitar. Although I realized I was making a different record in L.A. than I was making with Dean, there was this through-line in the lyrics and the delivery, despite the different producers and different studios.

“We put it all together to make *The Burning Bright* and it’s... the perfect record. It all works together – the lyrics, the instrumentation, the sound. Everything. I don’t know if that’s the ideal way to make a record,” Wood laughs, “but it feels like it is now.”

Even a cursory listen confirms the record’s astonishing candor of lyrics, and virtuosity of the music, as heard in the already released, and outrageously hooky single, “Forever and Ever.” Wood allows “the single doesn’t quite fit the mood of the album, but it’s an honest song celebrating true and real love, which I am a firm believer in.”

All of which means our man is destined to revisit these highly personal songs - pardon the pun - forever and ever. Any trepidation?

“I have never dealt with life without music in it, so if I wasn’t writing a song that forced me to feel something genuine, I’d be listening to something that did,” Wood says, citing Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young and Van Morrison as tireless inspirations.

“I always want to perform honest music that I connect with and am touched by. And if that means I have to go out there emotionally, then I will go there emotionally. That’s why I am not on some psychiatrist’s couch,” he smiles, “because I get to do this.”