

Apocalypse Now

British rock band Foals are tackling big issues facing humanity. Oisin Lunny finds out how an Oxford party band evolved into a stadium-filling force of fury.

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The lungs of the Earth are on fire. Amazon rainforests are razed to the ground, and the afternoon sky above São Paulo is midnight-black. The powerful are inoculated from the consequences of their actions by lifetimes of privilege and corruption. Populations are hypnotised by reality TV, distracted by social media, and pocketed into the polarising allegiances of the internet. Are you ‘yes’ or ‘no’, ‘stay’ or ‘go’? There is no in-between.

We have just over ten years to avert an irreversible climate change catastrophe. Siberia is burning so hot you can see it from space. The zeitgeist is damaged. What kind of world will our children inherit?

As the sixth mass extinction unfolds, Foals are asking the big questions. Is there time to save the planet? Is there time to save ourselves?

I meet Foals’s lead vocalist and guitarist Yannis Philippakis, drummer and percussionist Jack



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Bevan, and guitarist Jimmy Smith at midnight, backstage at a rock festival in Barcelona. A smart, likeable, and dynamic bunch, tonight they rock Hawaiian shirts with varying degrees of loudness. We find some space in a production portacabin and talk over the noise from a neighbouring stage. Two hours later, Foals will take to that stage and destroy it. Live, they are fierce and uncompromising. Their ascendance is powered by their fury.

Jimmy tells the story of how Foals formed in their hometown of Oxford. He went to school there with Walter Gervers, the former Foals bassist, who later befriended Jack in art school. Jack was in a band with Yannis, and Jimmy was duly persuaded to join them. He recalls, with some self-deprecation, that there was a degree of serendipity involved in his decision: “If I hadn’t smoked so much weed maybe I’d have

made more plans and would have had a job instead.”

In the early days, the band played house parties in Oxford. Their subsequent trajectory has been meteoric, earning them NME and Q Award wins, along with multiple Mercury Prize, Ivor Novello, and BRIT Award nominations. Their tracks have been streamed hundreds of millions of times – these days they pack out Alexandra Palace rather than student living rooms.

I ask the band how they avoid burnout. Jack recalls the spring of 2017, when the group had just finished a gruelling tour. “We toured so hard, I was exhausted for a whole month.” Jack recharged by cycling across France with friends. “Cycling is probably the best thing that I know in terms of calming the mind. I got up at 6am every day and cycled 50 to 100 miles, and did it for a month until





Jimmy joined me at the end.” Jimmy interjects: “I did one lap around a lake, then started drinking pints.”

Yannis has a distinct energy compared to Jimmy and Jack, a brooding intensity. He reveals that during the break he travelled to Mount Athos in Greece and lived in a monastery. “I felt like I really needed to do something that was the total opposite of the hedonism of the road, something that took me out of my comfort zone.” He was joined by his father, who spent time in the same monastery in the 60s and 80s. “It’s important to try and do stuff with people that matter to you when you’ve got that chance.”

The Philippakis family home in Greece provides a sanctuary from the relentless pressures of modern life. “I feel like I’m totally ensnared in the technology that surrounds me,” explains Yannis. “When I go to Greece, in general I’m in

a remote village. It’s quite cut off, and I really crave that. And that’s partly why I went. I actively wanted to feel bored and restless like I did when I was 15, in order to try and write music out of that place rather than coming out of an overly stimulated place, the adrenaline and the hype of being in a band. I wanted to almost forget about being in the band for a bit. I thought it would result in something fresher.”

Yannis’s approach to preserving his creative spark is intense. “I didn’t play any instruments for about eight months, that was partly because I wanted to just have that overwhelming itch, so that when the writing would start it would feel urgent and vital. I cherish and enjoy feeling creatively potent. I don’t want to take it for granted.”

Following their break, the band established a recording space in Peckham,

near to where they live, and *Everything Not Saved Will Be Lost*, their double album released in two parts, was completed in 18 months. The work reflects the band’s concerns about the world. “In general terms, ten years ago I felt optimistic,” says Yannis. “Now I feel a sense of anxiety and disappointment, and essentially fear about the future.

“The albums are a soundtrack to now,” he continues. “It’s like Pandora’s box of anxiety, complexity, the overwhelming labyrinth we are living in. I wanted to tap into this feeling of not knowing how to plot a correct course, that sense of bewilderment.”

Foals’s sonic identity is a restless one. Their guitar-driven sound has always been punchy, but Part One of their double album unveiled a new brutality, adding pulsing techno synths and other unexpected touches to the dystopian mix. Part Two, dropping 18 October, takes it even further. Yannis describes it as, “The rock record we’ve been waiting to make our whole career.” Listeners



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can expect incendiary guitar riffs over thunderous, stadium-sized drums, as heard in 'The Runner', which follows the intro.

Yannis explains that the track picks up directly where the scorched imagery of 'Sunday', the final track in Part One, left off. "It's about somebody trying to outrun themselves, but also it takes place in the same landscape," he says.

The two-part concept album provides a fitting black mirror for our times, one urging collective action. On the subject of environmental collapse, Jimmy's humorous side is momentarily lost. "It's so colossal, isn't it? You can sit on your sofa and think about it for five minutes, and you're crushed."

Jack agrees, "This is the fucking end of the world, and no one's doing anything about it." Jimmy continues, "The younger generations are now the ones

properly protesting. Our generation might slip through with burnt tails, but they're the ones that are going to bear the brunt. Why would anybody wish that on the future of civilisation?"

Foals are far from fatalistic, though. In person, they are energised, fired up, intensely alive. It may seem that we live in apocalyptic times. But another, lesser-known Greek definition of the word may be just as apt, the word *ἀποκάλυψις* (*Apokalypsis*), meaning 'revelation', or a lifting of the veils of illusion. If we can see beyond the veils, we can take action.

Foals are mad as hell, and they're not going to take it anymore. Neither should you.

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