

# HUNT FOR THE WILDERP

IN WRITING THE SECOND **BLACK FOXXES** ALBUM, **REIÐI**, FRONTMAN MARK HOLLEY PUSHED HIMSELF BEYOND HIS LIMITS IN ICELAND. THERE, HE FOUND BEAUTY, RAGE AND A RENEWED SENSE OF SELF...

WORDS: JAMES MACKINNON PHOTOS: ANDY FORD

If you were to follow a compass north by northwest, moving past Scotland, over the Orkney and Shetland Islands, and a further 260 miles still from the Faroe Islands, you eventually find a landmass before hitting the Arctic Circle: Iceland.

On its surface it boasts stunning scenery of frostbitten mountains, glaciers and waterfalls, yet beneath it straddles the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, a volatile gap between the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates that gives rise to explosive geysers and occasional volcanic eruptions. It is a land of ice and fire. Yet it is on this unpredictable blob in the Atlantic that Mark Holley wrote much of Black Foxxes' second album, *Reiði*, and found a mirror for his own nature.

"I instantly felt an affinity with this place, because it felt like what I was living in my head was happening right here," says the 29-year-old frontman, sitting in a kitchen in Reykjavik as snow dampens the murmur of the streets outside. "It sounds stupid, but the weather, the climate, the tenacity, the rage, the calm, everything was completely parallel to what I was going through in my mind. I left a lot of my past self here."

Mark's struggles with anxiety, depression and Crohn's disease have been well documented, not least in the lyrical honesty of Black Foxxes' 2016 debut *I'm Not Well* and a BBC documentary on Crohn's that he presented last year. Yet before he first ventured to

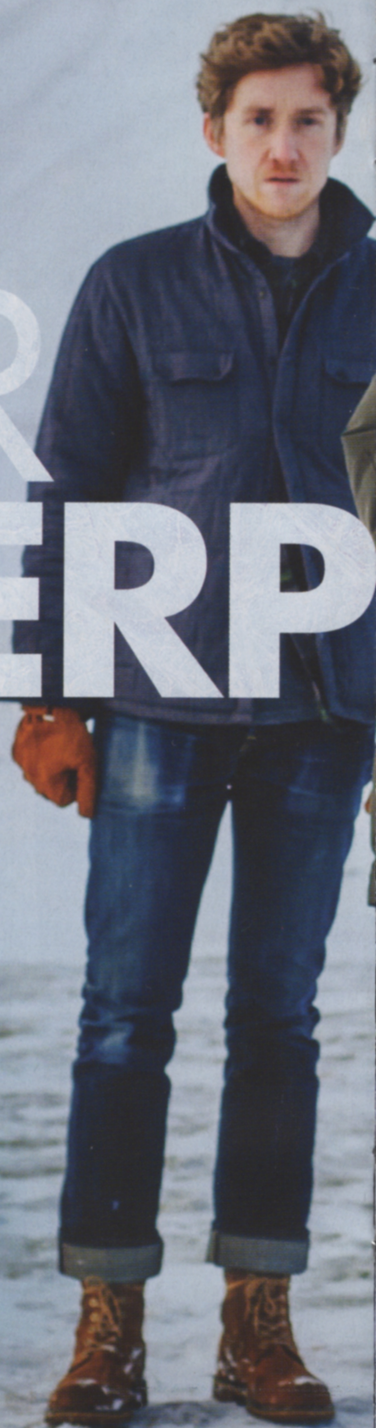
Iceland four years ago, Mark found himself shut off from the wider world. "The reason I came was because I had spent six years of my life with this anxiety and depression, but I didn't know that's what it was," he says. "I couldn't really do anything."

He eventually sought help through hypnotherapy and counselling, part of his treatment being to book a trip and confront the paralysing anxiety head-on. Iceland presented a practical option: only a few hours away, yet the polar opposite of his comfort zone. Before he even stepped on a plane, though, Mark began pushing himself to extremes.

"My biggest fear at the time was being 40,000 feet in the air and having a panic attack. So I built up to it. I deliberately got myself into traffic jams," he says, meeting Kerrang!'s look of disbelief dead-on. "I would have a panic attack in rush hour to let myself know I wouldn't die."

He would still experience panic attacks on the flight, yet Mark describes feeling an instant calm as soon as he landed in Reykjavik. "I've been to a lot of places in the world and I've never felt anything like I have in this country. I overcame so much and I accomplished it in this space, which was reflecting what I was feeling. It was a resetting process living out here, and as soon as I left, I felt wrong to leave."

The volcanic island lingered in Mark's imagination for a long time after. So much so that in December





## PEOPLE

2016, after a year spent touring and releasing *I'm Not Well*, he returned to Iceland with his then-girlfriend, this time pushing out further and secluding himself for a fortnight in a remote cabin within viewing distance of Eldborg crater.

"Every morning would be spontaneous," he remembers fondly. "We would look at a map and say, 'We'll go there today.' The whole point we went to the middle of nowhere was to feel a new extreme."

It wasn't all sunshine and Sigur Rós, though. With exploration confined to the mere four hours of daylight Iceland allows in wintertime, Mark found himself spending a lot of time sitting in the cabin and staring out into the cold, sometimes luminous night. From there, songs poured out. "This was the first time that I took a notebook," he explains. "I had never written lyrics like that before, without music, and I just could not stop writing. [I wrote] probably seven tracks from the album [in that burst] and they were done."

But as Mark reveals, it was not the colours of the aurora borealis that sparked this flood of inspiration, so much as their absence.

"The northern lights were easy to write about for a few lines, but there's so much going on that your mind gets clouded. But when there is just intense stillness, your mind can't focus on anything other than what

*For Foxx sake, hurry up and take the pic, it's freezing!*



you need to write about. I think the reason I wrote the most songs out there is because I hadn't really felt... calm," he says, after a long pause. "I hadn't felt nothingness for a long time." Its hardly surprising. While Mark can trace this restlessness well past the onset of anxiety or his diagnosis with Crohn's in his early 20s, the sleepless period recording *I'm Not Well* particularly pushed the Exeter native to his limits.

"I fucking hated it," he says dejectedly, shaking his head. "The more you're singing about real things that are affecting you at the time, the more you're just telling yourself you're fucked-up. That's how it works."

And you never considered writing about topics that are easier to cope with?

"No, because the music fucking means something to us. There are so many bands you can hear when they're singing that they don't mean it!" he spits, throwing up his hands in agitation. "Everything meant so fucking much to me. And I would go home at night and think, 'Man, you're fucked.'"

Despite the unwavering support and understanding of his bandmates – bassist Tristan Jane and drummer Ant Thornton – touring only compounded matters for Mark, where insomnia and alopecia took its toll: "I'd text the tour manager and say, 'I'm going home. I haven't slept for six fucking days.' At the time I had major hair loss, so I would literally have a shower and heaps of hair would come out. It was horrible."

So what made it worth it?

"You play the show and it's this fucking euphoria. I just go to this other place and release everything. I wanted to get past that phase, because I did feel it was a phase, and now we're here," he says, lightness entering his voice. "This record is completely the polar opposite. There's a lot of rage, but when I listen to the tracks there's this calm. It's like, 'He's at ease.'"

**W**e plot a course through Iceland's Golden Circle the next day, a well-frequented hub of geysers and waterfalls. Ant describes their previous trip during a wet January as "like an extreme version of Cornwall". By comparison, today resembles an episode of *Ice Road Truckers*. Craggy black mountains and needle-like trees punctuate the snowy expanses lining the road. You start to understand why

## ALL THE RAGE

WE'LL SAVE YOU THE COST OF AN ICELANDIC-ENGLISH DICTIONARY AND TELL YOU **REIÐI** TRANSLATES TO RAGE. BUT ONLY MARK CAN TELL YOU WHAT IT MEANS TO HIM

"It's the wasted years. It's the debilitating illness. It's seeing your mum upset. Some of it is trivial shit and it makes me angry. On the song *Flowers*, I wanted to be more abstract and there was a lot of Nick Cave in there, in the way he's so confident when singing and has these characters. So one night I started singing, 'I am rage!' and I liked playing this

character – brash and arrogant. At the end of the album I'm singing, 'Now I understand rage,' whereas at the beginning of the album I'm not understanding it, so halfway through I quite liked that, 'Fuck it, I am it!'

"A lot of people would see it as aggressive, but that's not what it's like for me at all. Rage for me is beating myself up and not

being able to achieve the things I can. That will always be there, but I like that, because that makes me want to create more. I think I understand it because I've come full-circle, and I feel that's a really nice way to end this album. Compared to when I did *I'm Not Well*, I do understand myself."

Icelandic bands like Sólstafr place such emphasis on dramatic backdrops in their music, and less on words. This intoxicating effect permeates *Reiði*.

"The scenery absolutely reflects everything sonically," explains Mark, his eyes lighting up. "You think of Sigur Rós, then you drive around Iceland and it's like you can hear it. That was absolutely what was going on in the writing, it was bouncing off of everything."

That sense of awe is mirrored in the glacial calm of *The Big Wild*, while the presence of strings carve out striking new emotional peaks on *Oh, It Had To Be You*. But like the shifting climate, where freak blizzards can erase the landscape into TV static, this calm can rapidly give way to a transformative chaos. This is best heard on bold midway point *Joy*, which dissolves into a clamouring miasma of trumpet.

"I was already doing these feedback swirls during the fade out, and the trumpet guy was coming in for another track," Mark recalls, with a sly grin. "So I said to Ade [Bushby, producer], 'Let's put the trumpet guy through some pedals instead.' I had to beg him, but the moment the first note hit Ade was like, 'That sounds great!'" He laughs, "It's my favourite track!"

Yet amongst the sense of adventure on *Sæla* or the empowering declarations of rage (see panel), there is another element that rears its head. It is a struggle between purpose and powerlessness, most explicitly

articulated in *Am I Losing It: 'Am I useless yet? / I feel so numb / Am I wasting my life / On all that I've done?'*

"When I'd finish tour I'd get so sick I didn't feel like a real person. Early on, I was so selfish I thought, 'If I get too sick, then fuck the band. I don't care.'" Mark confesses. "The guys have seen me at my worst, and I didn't realise how much I cared about the band until I got healthy. Then, I realised it's everything to me."

Fear and rage still feature in Mark's life. But these days he's using that fire positively rather than letting it consume him.

"Now, I've got a new fear of not achieving everything I need to, because I spent so many years not living," he says with renewed confidence. "When I'm 40, I want to look back and go, 'I literally bled and gave everything.'"

Bold words. And coming from a man who pushed himself almost to the ends of the Earth for his art, they carry a weight of conviction. It is a weight that *Reiði*, an album as stark and beautiful as the land that formed it also carries, and is about to mark Black Foxxes out as one of British rock's most intrepid adventurers.

**REIÐI IS SET FOR RELEASE ON MARCH 16 VIA SEARCH & DESTROY RECORDS. BLACK FOXXES TOUR THE UK IN MARCH AND APRIL – SEE THE GIG GUIDE**



**"I LEFT A LOT OF MY PAST SELF HERE"**

MARK HOLLEY

