

Since 2003's *Blueprints for the Black Market*, **ANBERLIN** have been resonating with so many as the ideal soundtrack to the question: 'What does it all mean?' Front man **Stephen Christian** tells Lucy Valentine that with new album *Vital*, it's time to figure it out for herself.

A N B E R L I N

NO BLACK — and WHITE

Words: LUCY VALENTINE





Anberlin's Vital album is out now through Universal/Republic



"For me, the whole record encompasses a main focus of energy, electricity, the vibrant spirit about the entire show," Stephen explains excitedly. "That's my favourite part about getting on stage, my favourite part about being in this band. Those moments—that hour and a half of just passion."

If the giddy excitement in his voice is anything to go by, Stephen is a man who purely and unpretentiously lives for his art. Having just stepped off stage in Seattle on tour with the Smashing Pumpkins, his post-performance high is infectious as he eagerly explains the inspirations behind Anberlin's brand new masterpiece *Vital*.

"The music on this record was the brainchild of a few different members of the band, which is incredible," he starts. "It was amazing to be able to sort through songs to put the album together. This is also the first record that our drummer Nate contributed three songs to. It was so great to have so many people musically drawing inspirations, and I feel absolutely blessed to work with so many great musicians who are that talented."

This evident humility in Stephen carries through into every aspect of the band. You definitely won't be seeing rock star demands and bad behaviour from Anberlin. Rather, the boys have quite a reputation for always making an epic effort to meet fans, as well as generally being one of the friendliest bunch of dudes in rock. So how have Anberlin avoided the holier-than-thou rock star ego?

"Rock star" to me is such an '80s term," Stephen laughs. "You know, there's that whole '80s hair metal, make-up, 'I'm better than you, I'll go on when I feel like' attitude. That's not us. I think the best way to avoid it is to surround yourself with people that know you, and will call you out on being a rock star or thinking that you're better than everyone else. Honestly, we've kicked out a few members who thought they were rock stars, who wanted that persona. There's just no place for that. We're not in the '80s. The fans and the friends we make are the only reason we are still a band. Without them we

says. "Some songs fall short of the grand scheme, but I'd rather bands become better musicians and songwriters rather than rehashing old music. The fact that we're six records deep is a testament to the evolution as a band—we're getting better and progressing."

Touché. While *Cities* was a huge achievement for Anberlin, *Vital* just blows everything out of the water. Both musically and lyrically, it's every defining characteristic of Anberlin's soul-searching, self-reflective rock refined and perfected. In previous interviews Stephen has noted *Blueprints* for the *Black Market* as a childish "Man vs. World" album, with *Cities* as maturing into themes of "Man vs. Self." If this is the case, *Vital* wants to blur the lines and disregard any black and white. "Man vs. Nothing 'Cos I'm Chill," if you like. While it seems to spin a pretty cohesive web of powerful emotion and introspection, Stephen is quick to point out it's not a concept record.

"I'm a big fan of concept records, but I'm too ADHD to hone in on one exact theme for a record," he explains. "I myself would get bored of my own lyrics. I draw inspiration from life itself and interpret my surroundings and use that as

like whatever is, is. But nobody takes the time to figure it all out for themselves. They have no idea where they are politically, they have no idea where they are with God, with drugs, or how they feel about sex. If you go through your entire life kind of spinning out with these ideas that everyone else implants, then you're never really solidified as a human. It's like Aristotle said, 'Know thyself,'" he continues. "And that was thousands of years ago. Already this guy had said that one of the basic keys to life is to know thyself. The whole song is really a reiteration on one philosopher's idea of, 'Hey: Figure it out yourself, figure out what YOU believe.' The song is not about me trying to translate or tell people what to believe, it's more or less me trying to push them to the thought of, 'Figure it out on your own.'"

Vital certainly doesn't hesitate in tugging at those heart-strings in typical Anberlin fashion. Right from the onset of opener *Self-Starter's* crashing verses, Stephen's hauntingly commanding vocals are pleading: 'I still can't feel nothing/just want to hold something.' Pick up a copy of the album and you'll be greeted with some beautifully affecting album artwork too, with a cover image of a couple embracing amongst a heavy maelstrom of waves. How did Anberlin go about amplifying the spirited feel of the album with its artwork?

"After we focused on the themes of energy and vibrancy, Nate, who takes the art direction, now wanted to mirror that," explains Stephen. "I told him I want vibrancy, I want it to feel alive. The visual reflects 'Vital' the word, the whole concept of it."

It's already being praised and adored by critics and fans alike, but where does Stephen himself see *Vital* sitting, in the grand scheme of Anberlin?

"To me, with *Vital*, the title in itself was the goal," he says. "We attempted to create the record people would judge us by, and I think *Vital* is definitely it. So far all the reviews have said kinda the same thing. I just wanted this record to be the one that years down the road, this is what my great great grandchildren will be hearing. By calling it *Vital*, by pursuing *Vital* as our defining record... in twenty years when some kid is like, 'What was your favourite band, dad?' and his dad says, 'Anberlin', this is the record I'd want them to play." ❁

THERE'S NO BETTER WORD TO DESCRIBE IT: THERE'S NO BLACK AND WHITE. THERE'S NO RIGHT AND WRONG IN CIVILISATION, IT JUST SEEMS LIKE WHATEVER IS, IS. BUT NOBODY TAKES THE TIME TO FIGURE IT ALL OUT FOR THEMSELVES. (STEPHEN)

are absolutely nothing. Anyone in music needs to realise that. The world revolves around them—the fans, not you."

The dedication of fans has been both a blessing and a curse for Anberlin. There's always been that select group of Anberlin fans who fell so madly in love with 2007's *Cities* that they've since seen that album as the benchmark for subsequent releases, comparing and judging accordingly. Whilst frustrating, Stephen doesn't seem too bothered by the attitude.

"I am all for bands changing, evolving, becoming better versions of themselves," he

inspiration, or things happening in my own life. I draw from that to create the record."

Anberlin have always been an openly Christian group of guys, a label which seems to have defined the band for many, regardless of their intentions. This considered, song titles on the new album like *God*, *Drugs* and *Sex* have certainly sparked up some curiosity.

"I feel like there are so many people in this world that are so grey," Stephen muses, pondering on the topic. "There's no better word to describe it: There's no black and white. There's no right and wrong in civilisation, it just seems

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HYPERBOLIC AND FUCKIN' PSEUDO-PROPHETIC

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Words: **LUCY VALENTINE** | Photos: **BEN CLEMENT**

"I don't want to sound too hyperbolic or fuckin' ... pseudo-prophetic," frontcrazy laughs, excusing his verbosity. I'm pretty terrified to sit down with **LETLIVE**. They have a rep for some of the most violent, self-destructive and generally batshit insane onstage behaviour this side of Henry Rollins circa 1983. **Jason** seems like the kind of guy who'd tear you apart with his bare hands if he was looking for his car keys. With *The Blackest Beautiful* (the follow up to 2010's super adored *Fake History*) set for its imminent unleashment in July, I find out hardcore's favourite madman is in fact intimidatingly well spoken, intelligent and gracious. Hyperbolic and fuckin' pseudo-prophetic, indeed. →

THE *Blackest Beautiful* is killer. It's definitely a departure in terms of sound from *Fake History*, though. What's changed for Letlive. between the two albums?

We just grew up, honestly. I feel as though the attitude or the essence that is Letlive. is very prevalent still in this album, it's just a matter of the music itself maybe seeming a little different. But ultimately I think it was us trying to exercise who we are as artists as best we can and as musicians. We all listen to a myriad of different things; different tastes and palates of music. That's probably what you hear on the album.

What exactly is that "essence that is Letlive."?

The whole idea of Letlive. being more than just a band is essentially just understanding. The way I like to put it is, "Do you, whilst letting others do them." It's just a matter of understanding and trying to co-exist.

There seems to be a lot of deeply personal stuff on this album lyrically, am I right in saying that?

Definitely. The lyrics on this album I think were really geared or catalysed by me understanding that there are many things personally that I've tried to bury and not pay attention to, and realising that in order for me to become an instrumental part of any sort of progress, I first have to note and acknowledge my flaws—which I think I had been avoiding. I think the best way for us as people to understand what it is to better ourselves and to better anything from the individual to the world is just noting that our imperfections are actually very beneficial and can be utilised in good ways. I think with all the lyrics I was trying to talk about things that I understand the best I can, and hope that others can relate to them too.

You make it sound like writing music is a kind of therapy or catharsis for you.

Oh, yeah. I think for this album especially. *Fake History* was me writing my account of scenarios and instances and situations that I've observed, whereas this is more so my inclusion; both my involvement in great things as well as terrible things that have happened in my life. You know, I can't mitigate my part in either one of those.

Is being a musician always what you knew you wanted to do?

For the most part. Music was the one thing of my life that remained a constant; something I've always returned to, and something I've always found myself most interested in. There was a point where I thought I was going to be a pro skateboarder, then I broke both my ankles. And then I thought I was going to be a teacher, but I couldn't adhere to establishment well enough. So music has prevailed.

Do you feel you've 'made it' as a band, is this you what you envisioned Letlive. becoming?

Yeah, I mean shit—I'm on a marble table, talking to a nice young lady about our new record! I think we've made it in that sense. To expect so much from anything but especially music in general can be a little grandiose. You have to really appreciate what you get. If you want more, then you have to work for it. Everything we have now we feel is something we've worked towards and we're very, very thankful. If there is to be more



given to us then we'll gladly accept, but we stay grateful. It really is just so rad that people not only want to listen to our record but give a shit about what we're saying.

You definitely use your position to get a message across. There are some quite political themes throughout *The Blackest Beautiful*.

I feel as though, at least with our brand or breed of music, you have to say something. If you're afforded the chance to have people listen to what you're saying, you better say something that pertains to more than just yourself. If you don't, I think it's selfish, and it can be wasteful. At least for us, I mean not for every band, I don't think everyone should be writing these political manifestos and putting them to music. But I definitely think there's a reason people are listening, so we want to do our best to say something potent.

Growing up in LA, has the city itself been a definitive part of what you feel is your identity as a band?

Yes it is. Los Angeles is definitely a cultural hub, we get to see so many different pieces of people and things, and the music scene itself is an epicentre for so many great things. But there's probably just as many good things as there are bad. There's a strange balance. Awesome music, shitty music, awesome people and shitty people. So that dichotomy, that polarity lends itself to a very interesting scenario. It's definitely helped us as a band and as people to understand who

we are and who we don't want to be.

Your onstage behaviour is a huge part of what people love about Letlive., but does it ever cause trouble for you? I mean, the last time I saw you, you were smashing stage lights with your bare hands ...

Quite often we do get in trouble [laughs]. But Richard—our tour manager and one of our oldest friends—has known us for so long he can sort of predict what will happen. He knows how to deal with the stuff I do, knows how to speak to people in a way that I possibly cannot do because I'm so riled up in the moment. We do get in trouble but we find ways to prevent it. We'll buy our own microphones and cables, we pay for everything we break. Sometimes I feel as though people have just never seen something like this happen so they overreact. No one's ever really getting hurt, unless it's ourselves. But that's okay.

You seem to throw so much of yourself into your performances, it's incredibly intense to watch and be a part of. The physical aspect aside, it must be quite draining for you emotionally.

It certainly is, but I think with that, it sort of reminds me of being a human being. You know, I spent so much time trying to be someone I thought I was supposed to be, even becoming the man I am now I find myself forgetting that it's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay to show the humanistic qualities that may seem a little weak. So it is very exhausting, but I think it's very necessary too. ✿



THIS RECORD WILL SHATTER AND DESTROY YOU, CONVULSING IN HYSTERICAL RAGE AND PACIFYING WITH GENTLE FRAGILITY ALL AT ONCE. HUGE.

LETLIVE.

The Blackest Beautiful

Epitaph

I wonder what it was like reviewing *The Shape of Punk To Come* in 1998. Like, what would you say upon hearing something so huge, so genre-defining, something that shakes you to the very core of your existence? Since then hardcore's once incendiary light has been flickering and fading, dampened by the downpour of breakdowns-by-numbers monotony. With 2010's *Fake History*, Letlive. came out of nowhere and gave us a little glimmer of hope, and now *The Blackest Beautiful* confirms they are here to spark that flame, smash the glass that houses it, and burn everything around it to the fucking ground. This is hardcore in a new dimension. This is savage, visceral power tempered by perfect nuance, beautifully intricate melodies and bittersweet introspection. Jason Aalon Butler somehow makes pouring your heart and soul out 'til you're quivering in a pool

of your own emotional fragility seem manly as fuck. Highlights are to be found in *Pheromone Cvt* and *Virgin Dirt*, both flaunting darkness and dreaminess that builds and swells into terrifying maelstroms of hardcore ferocity. You don't just listen, you feel every song on this record, they course through your veins like a drug that's intoxicating and killing you at the same time. From the second opener *Banshee* (*Ghost Fame*) launches into its ferocious assault (flirting with rap-rock and making it work) to the composed chaos of closer *27 Club*, this record will shatter and destroy you, convulsing in hysterical rage and pacifying with gentle fragility all at once. Huge.

FOR FANS OF: Glassjaw, Title Fight, Refused.

LUCY VALENTINE | Photo: **BEN CLEMENT**

