

Deas Vail

BIRDS & CAGES

“Can you tell me that the page will turn itself and take us somewhere else?” Wes Blaylock sings on the latest Deas Vail album *Birds & Cages*.

The longing sentiment of this simple but open-ended line is at the heart of a dozen songs that take on Everest-sized questions about freedom, love, hope, fear, transformation and just what it means to become a better human being.

If that seems like a tall order for a modern rock album, Deas Vail make their soul-searching inquiries sound exhilarating, with swooning choruses, sparkly panoramic arrangements and lyrics that flirt with darkness but ultimately tilt towards optimism.

“The record definitely has a lot of question marks in it,” Blaylock says with a chuckle. “I’m a firm believer in asking big questions. I feel like sometimes people go through life and they’re timid or afraid to ask questions because they don’t want to be judged. I’m trying to write as honestly and personally as I can, and it’s kind of scary for me.”

The boldness of the questions resonated with Blaylock’s four bandmates when they convened in their practice space in Russellville, Arkansas to write material for their fifth record. “As we were working on the songs, this theme of bondage versus freedom came up,” Blaylock recalls. “We called the record *Birds & Cages* because we felt like we were just stuck in these cages in life. Yet there was freedom there, just beyond. The songs are about the search for freedom and release from all the cages.”

Deas Vail write their songs together, and Blaylock is quick to praise his bandmates for what they bring to the table. “Kelsey is absolutely the backbone of the group. I’ve never known a drummer more consistent. Justin our bass player definitely brings more of a rock element. It gives us a little more energy, and helps me from being overly dark. My wife Laura plays keyboards and helps a lot with melodies. Both she and our guitarist Andy are the best at being constructively critical. They always have a broader perspective on the songs. There’s just a beautiful amount of grace and patience among the members of our band. We all help each other.”

The two songs that give the album its evocative title may be the most memorable the band has yet composed. Blaylock calls the anthemic “Cages” “the one he’s most proud of on the record,”

while of “Birds” he says, “Over the last couple years, churches have come to look more like businesses to me than anything. So it’s about finding truth amongst all of these complications. Or just finding yourself even in a corporate group of people who share the same beliefs. We as humans just complicate everything. Everything gets watered down or foggy. There’s just so much sediment everywhere that we really can’t see the goal or the big picture.”

There is indeed a feeling of emotional release in the sweeping contours of openers “The Things You Were,” “Growing Pains” and “Excuses,” with Blaylock pushing his skyscraping wonder of a voice up, over and around shining mists of guitars, pounding drums and dramatic strings. This elegant buoyancy is the sonic thread that runs throughout the record. Even when the mood shifts, from the autumnal chamber pop of “Dance In Perfect Time” through prog-influenced gear-shifter “The Great Physician” to the delicate music box pirouette of “Puzzles and Pieces,” there is a sense that, for all the uncertainty, the search for something more will be rewarded.

And helping the band on *Birds & Cages* is returning producer Mark Townsend (Relient K, House of Heroes), who infuses the tracks with pristine clarity and old school warmth. “Mark has a really clear head and a very focused vision,” says Blaylock, “and he knows how to capture what we want to capture in the songs. Just the little things he does make a huge difference - deciding what tempos to make songs so that they feel exactly in the pocket, keeping everything perfectly in tune and always getting the best performance out of us.”

When Deas Vail (which translates as “humble servant”) formed in 2003, Blaylock says the goal was to back his own acoustic singer-songwriter project, with no bigger picture in mind than friends having fun. “We didn’t think we’d be doing it professionally years later,” Blaylock says. But two albums, two EPs and a few member changes later, the band has matured into a formidably tight unit. “The rapport and chemistry has gotten deeper,” he says. “We’ve gotten braver, and we felt like on this album, we weren’t in any boxes and we could just do whatever we wanted. Be experimental and try different ideas, move forward and do new things. We’re still growing, still writing better songs.”

As Deas Vail looks ahead to a near-future of touring and more touring, Blaylock says he hopes that *Birds & Cages* might bring listeners “a sense of relief, a breath, a rejuvenation in their own lives.”

“I feel like that’s a whole lot to ask,” he admits, “but then we’ve gotten feedback from fans over the years, and they say, ‘I was going through a rough time in my life, and I listened to this song of yours and it really helped me get through.’ I can’t even describe what an amazing feeling that is - that this little band from Arkansas can write these songs, put them out there, and then somebody can be encouraged or feel like it’s little easier to get through life because of this music. It would be amazing if we could continue to help people in that way.”

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