

# DEAS VAIL

"I don't know what love is . . ."

Despite the humble admission that opens the self-titled new release from Deas Vail, the album sizes up the emotion with some beautifully poetic and eloquent metaphors. Over the course of twelve songs, love takes the shape of a fiery dragon, a closed doorway, a distant tower and an unpredictable ghost.

While these kind of open-hearted imaginings have long been the lifeblood of poets and artists, for lead singer and songwriter Wes Blaylock it was a foray into uncharted territory. "It's definitely new for me, because I haven't written a lot about love in a straight-ahead way, at least not consciously," he says. "My writing has been more conceptual and visual. But a lot of these songs are inspired by interactions I see between people I know.

"On a more personal level, I've been married for four years, and I love it," he continues. "It's the greatest. So I didn't want to ignore that right now in my life. I think those feelings give the record a lightheartedness. In the past, I've had a tendency to be a little dark, so it felt really good letting go a bit on this album."

There is indeed a positive uplift in the sweeping contours of the openers "Desire," "Sixteen" and "Summer Forgets Me," with Blaylock pushing his sky-scraping wonder of a voice up, over and around jangly guitars and head-bobbing grooves. This tender buoyancy is the sonic thread that runs throughout the record. Even when the mood downshifts, from the spaghetti western-flavored "Towers" through the pensive "Common Sense" to the stunning closer, "Meeting In Doorways," a sense of optimism beats beneath the surface. Or as the singer describes it, "a cautious optimism."

"There's always the fear that you're going to be cheesy when you're writing love songs," Blaylock admits with a laugh. "So I try to temper my lyrics by looking at all sides of relationships. But really, on this album, I tried not to think about that too much. I just tried to run with the songs and let them come effortlessly. I didn't want to overwork them. My strategy was to stick with the ones that came naturally, without all the sweat and effort."

That organic approach is in keeping with the band's evolution. 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," he says. But three 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."

Deas Vail write their songs together, and Blaylock is quick to praise his band mates for what they bring to the table. "Our drummer Wes Saunders is the newest member of the group. He's totally solid and really creative. 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."

And helping the band on this album is first-time producer, Relient K guitarist Matt Hoopes, who captures a live spirit and immediacy throughout. Blaylock says, "All of our records sound very studio, so we kind of wanted to do something that sounded a little grittier and more stripped down. What you're going to hear is what you'll hear on stage. As for Matt, he's a longtime friend, and he was working with us in pre-production, and at a certain point, we said, 'You know what, Matt? You get this music more than anybody else. You understand exactly what we want to do and you have some pretty amazing tools to get it done. We really took our time and had a blast making this record.'"

As Deas Vail look ahead to a fall release and getting back on the road, Blaylock says that he hopes the new record might "encourage and inspire" listeners in their own lives.

"I love music because it speaks to people in such different ways," Blaylock says. "You have words, melody, dynamics, volume. There's so many changes. Where people may look at a painting and not really understand what they're looking at without having to dive in and learn about it, with music, it's more natural to grab hold of something and not even know why. So I hope that the record reaches people in all different ways. I feel like that's a whole lot to ask 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 your song really helped me get through.' I can't even describe what an amazing feeling that is - that this little band from Arkansas can put these songs out there and then somebody can be encouraged or feel like it's little easier to get through life because of this music."