White Lies

If White Lies don’t strike you as party types, prepare for a surprise. On their fourth album, Friends, the Londoners have loosened up, pursued their love of pop and even dipped in to disco.

White Lies haven’t so much abandoned their trademark synth-rock sound as given it a spring clean by having fun exploring new sounds. For many reasons, making Friends felt like a fresh start. After three albums – 2009’s chart-topping To Lose My Life… and its Top 5 follow-ups Ritual in 2011 and Big TV in 2013 – the trio was temporarily without a label after a bout of record company reorganisation. Rather than re-sign straight away, they decided to start Friends under their own steam, without the pressure of a deadline or a budget to blow.

“We’d been signed since we were 18,” says frontman Harry McVeigh. “We’re all 28 now. Not having a label was liberating. We could write what we wanted, pick our own studio and choose who to work with. We could use what we’d learnt along the way and if another label liked our new songs they could sign us. It was like making a debut album again.”

The first song that stuck was Morning In L.A., a glistening hip shaker with tongue-in-cheek lyrics about maintaining friendships across time zones.

“Straight away the melody suggested pop rather than rock so that’s the route we took,” says Charles. “It’s one of the catchiest songs we’ve ever written, but also a bit silly. Lyrically, it’s about someone looking at their watch in London, waiting for L.A. to wake up so they can have a conversation.”

Whatever sound each song suggested, White Lies went with it. Hence, when Hold Back Your Love and Is My Love Enough took the trio down the disco route they embraced it. When the beautiful ballad Don’t Fall jettisoned their signature sound entirely, leaving only McVeigh’s sumptuous, sonorous vocals to connect it to White Lies of old, they left it. Similarly, when the triumphant Summer Didn’t Change A Thing harked back to the arena-ready rock of their debut, they didn’t mind.

Glorious lead single Take It Out On Me was begun as a fun experiment by Charles to create a chorus using only numbers.

“Right up until we recorded the song it was called 89-1-3,” says White Lies’ lyricist. “It was inspired by a lunatic on Instagram who kept commenting on a friend’s photos in pseudo Biblical verse. From his profile I discovered he lived in a remote cabin with a rough-looking dog. He posted weird videos in which he quoted random numbers. As a challenge, I turned them in to a song. The only problem was that it went so well everyone said it should be the first single, so I relented and gave the chorus real lyrics.”

The changing nature of relationships is a recurring theme throughout Friends, a result of the trio nearing 30.

“In the past couple of years, we’ve noticed friends’ life situations causing them to make big decisions – marriages, kids, moving out of London etc,” says Cave. “Friendships have begun to feel adult and our perception of time has changed. As kids, if you didn’t see a mate for a fortnight, you’d wonder what was wrong. Now you might not see someone for six months and it doesn’t matter. Do we feel old? Er, older.”

White Lies had Friends almost written when labels came calling. They signed with Infectious/BMG, due largely to label boss Korda Marshall, a long time White Lies fan who had tried to sign them first time round. By then they had decided to record without a producer, spending the bulk of their budget instead on flying in revered engineer James Brown (Foo Fighters, Arctic Monkeys) and accepting a rare invitation to record at Bryan Ferry’s private studio in London’s Olympia.

“The only other artist we know has recorded there is Prince,” says Jack. “It’s an amazing place, an archive as well as a studio that has lots of obscure Roxy Music posters, all of Bryan’s outfits from over the years and Eno’s vintage synths, which we were able to use.”

As much as the suits and the synths, the limitations of the studio proved inspirational.

“The place had a huge impact on the sound of the record,” says Harry. “The live room was too small to create the spacious drum sound we usually have, so we kept it tight and close, which lent itself to the dancier elements.

As well as the Grammy Award-winning Brown, White Lies brought in David Wrench (Caribou, FKA Twigs) to mix the record and long-time collaborator Ed Buller for additional production.

“When we thought we needed a boss, we called Ed, our spiritual dad,” says Charles. “He was blown away by Eno’s old synths, some of which hadn’t been played for 30 years. Helpfully, he’s a synth master so he knew how to use them. Some looked like a cockpit of a plane. One you played like Batttleships. Another made the incredible steel drum sound you hear at the end of Don’t Want To Feel It All.”

Despite the assistance, it was White Lies in charge and they loved it.

“There’s a keyboard we used on Take It Out On Me and Don’t Fall that sends shivers through any producer over the age of 35 because it reminds them of REO Speedwagon ballads,” laughs Charles. “It’s a dangerous sound to use too much, but no one’s heard it ages so we went with it. Ed was horrified. He told us to get rid of it, but we refused.”

It was also White Lies who decided not to include the song Friends that initially gave the album its title and will now be a B-side.

“Charles and I wrote that after listening to Thomas Dolby and drinking way too much coffee,” says Harry. “We wanted to shake things up, but Friends went too far, at least for this album. There’s a madness running through it and the outro is insane. Our fans will either love it or loathe it, but as proof of how far we were prepared to push ourselves, it’s one of our darlings. And who knows, it may end up inspiring a completely different album.”