**Sunflower Bean Set to Return with *“Twentytwo in Blue”*, a Second Album Made For Today**

Blue, as Julia Cumming of Brooklyn’s Sunflower Bean points out, is something of a “loaded color.” The word is of course often synonymous with sadness—certainly blues music isn’t known for its laughs. But blue is also the United Nations’ internationally recognized color of peace; the stripe in the rainbow on the Pride flag that represents serenity; and the “emotional color” of Sunflower Bean’s upcoming sparkling second album, *Twentytwo in Blue.* “We definitely don’t want it to come across as a sad record,” explains Cumming. “Blue is kind of hopeful, and we wanted to explore that color with this record.” The new LP by vocalist and bassist Cumming, drummer Jacob Faber and guitarist and vocalist Nick Kivlen is many things: rousing, romantic, topical, empathetic and insightful. But defeatist it’s not.

All three band members will in fact be 22 when *Twentytwo in Blue* is released in March of 2018, almost two years and two months after Sunflower Bean’s hazy, charming debut LP, *Human Ceremony*. They were two momentous years for the trio, who’ve now toured the world multiple times over on headlining stints and as support for indie rock essentials like DIIV, Best Coast, The Vaccines, Pixies and Wolf Alice. By the month, they only grew in accomplishment, and gained a newly confident voice they bring to the second album, one that doesn’t shy away from addressing the *other* events of those two years—political changes and cultural shifts that have left America and the world stupefied. “This has been such an unbelievable time,” says Kivlen. “I can’t imagine any artist of our ilk making a record and not have it be seen through the lens of the political climate of 2016 and 2017. So I think there’s a few songs on the record that are definitely heavily influenced by this sort of—whatever you want to say what the Trump administration has been.” “A shit show,” offers a helpful Faber.

The resistance is full-throated on *Twentytwo in Blue,* on tracks like “Burn It”, a rollicking power pop opener that declares war on the status quo: “The street it has my name/ I burn it to the ground.” “Crisis Fest” is a call to millennial arms, melding pop shimmer and drive with the personal and political. “2017—we know/ Reality’s one big sick show/ Every day’s a crisis fest”, Cumming sings. There are references to missile tests, “80 grand” in school debt, and a “coup” in the country, and an urgent, determined rave-up hook that puts the establishment on notice: “If you hold us back, you know that we can shout/ We brought you into this place/ You know we can take you out!” “It’s less a song about Donald Trump than it is about more of a generational divide,” says Kivlen. “And the ideals of tomorrow and progressive-leaning groups versus people who want things to stay the same or go backwards. It speaks to how our generation are demonized or seen as lazy, when actually we’re the most educated. People call us ‘snowflakes’ because we have sensitive ideals. But being sensitive is a good thing, because we’re attuned to people who’ve been tread on throughout history.”

Elsewhere on *Twentytwo in Blue*, the twangy gem “Sinking Sands” delves into Kivlen’s fascination with alarmist, conspiracy-laden podcasts and where that can lead in the era of “fake news”, and marries his droll, Beck-like lead vocal with a dreamy chorus from Cumming. The two share vocals again on “Puppet Strings” a proper glam rock stomper and sure-fire crowd pleaser in Sunflower Bean’s live shows, and on lead single “I Was a Fool”, released in November along with a darkly funny “misfit prom” video. And there are even echoes of our ongoing moment of cultural reckoning with generations of sexual harassment and abuse by men in power on “Twentytwo”, a breezy mid-tempo track with a sweetness that belies the dark truth at its core. “Busted and used/ That’s how you view your girl/ Now that she’s 22,” sings Cumming, who’s not only been part of an emerging young band, but also spent time in the youth-besotted fashion world. A telling line: “If I could do it I would take her in my arms/ I would unwrong all his wrongs.” “I’m not saying I want people to feel uncomfortable,” comments Cumming about the song. “But it is supposed to make you think, about age or being a woman or just the time frame in which you have to do things. And fighting against that.”

“Twentytwo” is only one example of a gentler side of Sunflower Bean that’s on display on the new album. While the trio remains a guitar band at its core, new and different textures were allowed in this time around. “What we’ve figured out in the couple of years since *Human Ceremony* is I think that we did a lot of the rock stuff, and didn’t get much time with the sweeter side,” says Faber. “And it just kind of felt right to explore this sweeter side and dive deep into that.” For the drummer that meant, “allowing each element its own space to live and breathe.” And for Cumming, that space meant room to truly *sing* like never before, on the sublime “Memoria” and “Only a Moment”, the closest Sunflower Bean has ever come to a ballad. “We’re a rock band, and we would never want to be a ballad-y band,” she says. “But also I think when you’re like 18 and 19, you need to scream, you know? And in life you’ll always need to scream. But I think before I was a little afraid to show myself as a singer, even to my band mates. And in fact they actually welcomed it, and we were able to push ourselves. I think if anything, after making this we’re the most well-rounded we’ve ever been.”

Unlike *Human Ceremony*,essentially a compilation of songs Sunflower Bean had created while still in their teens, over the first two and a half years of the band’s life, *Twentytwo in Blue* was built in a more compact, dedicated time frame. When Kivlen, Faber and Cumming completed a near 200-show world tour on Thanksgiving of 2016, the plan was for the trio to take a well-earned and extended break. But soon enough, the creative juices were flowing. “By mid-December we were already back in Jacob’s basement on Long Island just working on ideas,” recalls Kivlen. Once again, the band collaborated with longtime producer and champion Matt Molnar (Friends) and engineer Jarvis Taveniere (Woods), while new to the creative team this time was Jacob Portrait (Unknown Mortal Orchestra), on board as co-producer and mixer. “He and Matt kind of worked hand in hand to take the record to the next level,” says Cumming.

In three months the “bones” of the songs were written, and several got live test runs

in March of 2017, at New York’s Terminal 5. Tracking began in early summer, with mixing in early fall—the songs mutating and evolving along the way. “I think we’re constantly trying to push ourselves to make something better,” explains Faber. “And so I think with this we just wanted to dig deep into the songwriting process and really just try to focus on crafting these songs, and building them up. And also having the record just *sound* really incredible.” When all was said and done, says Cumming, “It was basically a year—December to December.”

If there was a ragged beauty in the gauzy, groovy wall of sound of *Human Ceremony* and its predecessor, the 2015 EP *Show Me Your Seven Secrets*, there’s a new directness to these songs, a product of the band’s growing maturity and the insanity of the times we’re in. *Twentytwo in Blue* is a record made by millennials in solidarity with their own—the most progressive, even revolutionary generation we’ve ever seen. Is it, sonically, a record that suits might call “more accessible”? It’s not hard to imagine the band picking up new disciples because of it. But while Sunflower Bean welcome anyone to the party, unlike our president they’re not concerned so much with the size of a crowd as with connecting with every person in it. “I think one word that always comes to mind when I think about this record is *lovable*,” says Cumming. “I think we all really want the record to be lovable. I want the songs to be something that someone can get attached to, and have be a part of them. Because that’s what I look for in songs myself, and that’s the kind of experience we want to give to others. It’s cherished by us, and we just want to share that with people, and communicate that with people.”

John Norris

November 2017