

Thomas Dollbaum

Birds of Paradise

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The realest-deal storyteller in indie-rock today is the Tampa-born, New Orleans-based singer/songwriter **Thomas Dollbaum**, and *Birds of Paradise* is his most powerful and dynamic work yet. Following up his critically acclaimed *Wellswood* (Big Legal Mess, 2022) and *Drive All Night* EP (Dear Life Records, 2025), *Birds of Paradise* is a goodbye letter to lost loved ones and former selves. These songs find Dollbaum searching for acceptance in the transient in-between places: Florida's pine flatwoods, backroads leading to 1-95, where birds fly across the water. And even though the ghosts of his alt-county predecessors Townes and Molina are definitely present, on *Birds of Paradise*, Dollbaum emerges from their shadows—waving to the past, sounding all the more like himself.

This moment—this album—is long overdue. Both of Dollbaum's previous releases had taken way too long to record, due to circumstances out of his control, leaving him frustrated. And after having been away from his home for eight years, the place he had left was no longer the place he remembered, and the unchanging of the natural world felt like a constant he wanted to write about. With a sense of immediacy, he wrote *Birds of Paradise* in three months. Called up the musicians he trusted and admired the most—Nick Corson, Josh Halper, and Jake Lenderman—and asked them to meet him at Dial Back Sound in Water Valley, Mississippi with producer/engineer Clay Jones. They learned and tracked the album in four days, capturing lightning in a bottle, a sonic revelation Dollbaum's writing has always been waiting for.

“Big Boi” recounts the time high school-aged Thomas got roped into giving a couple (outside the Waffle House) a ride to pick up drugs at a pill mill. At a time in indie-rock when many singer-songwriters like to proclaim they're Southern, Dollbaum knows it's more complicated than that. “One day I'll take you down to a place that you can never get out/ Couple splinters in the wall, nothing to brag about,” he sings steady and direct after realizing the mess he's in. It brings to mind the short story “Samaritans” by Larry Brown, where the narrator is tormented for having a helping heart. Like Brown, Dollbaum miraculously examines entrapment with generosity.

“Pulverize,” the album's hardest and darkest rocker, is sorta like another short story, “Time and Again,” by Breece D’J Pancake. Both song and story are told from the point of view of a man plowing down the road, picking up strangers, trying to forget real awful things they can't mention. Dollbaum was inspired by the time he tried to drive across Louisiana overnight but then, halfway, decided to turn around. In “Pulverize,” Dollbaum's narrator is too afraid to look back. “You should have seen me/ out of Texas in the high moon/ Playing with God riding across the border cooped up/ in a hooty to the promised land,” he struts. Lenderman harmonizes with

Dollbaum on the chorus, “Pulverize this heart.” Dollbaum sings the next line alone, slinging his voice the highest it’ll be the whole album: “I don’t even need it.” And by the end of the song, he’s screaming with an intensity we’ve never heard before: “It’s fine, it’s fine, it’s FINE.”

But it ain’t just grown men trying to move on in *Birds of Paradise*. “King’s Landing” playfully frolics from the point of view of little-kid-Dollbaum growing up near a little private airport. And he’s got big dreams of flying him and his folks outta there. “I wish I could take us from this town,” he sings. But knowing this dream is “probably a waste of time,” he suggests going home and watching “*Judge Joe Brown*/ And reruns of *Cops* episodes in our home town.” “I hope we catch one where the bad guy gets away,” Dollbaum offers some optimism, “Maybe he’ll steal a small plane/ Fly off to the everglades/ Build us a home out of water and snakes.” When there’s nothing else, survival and imagination are the same thing.

With the help of Lenderman, Halper, Corson, and Jones, *Birds of Paradise* is Dollbaum’s hard-won breakthrough. Alive and echoing like the poems and short stories you can’t shake: coyotes howl, birds fly south, kids chase rabbits through the sugar cane, and cigarettes are four dollars a pack. *Birds of Paradise* reminds us where we come from—the things inside ourselves we’ve forgotten—we just needed Dollbaum to show us. Here’s how to look back without fear or shame. Here’s authenticity.

– Ashleigh Bryant Phillips