

XCERTS

“*Hold On To Your Heart* is about finding a pinhole of light in the dark and turning it into the sun. We really did shoot for the stars with this one.” When Murray Macleod, frontman of The XCERTS, surmises the band’s new album, it’s with the same wild-eyed enthusiasm and passion with which he pens sing-along modern pop anthems infused with a thick layer of 80’s heartland rock. His proclamation of how music can turn the smallest pinprick of light into a dazzling solar spectacle is the motivating thread that weaves throughout the album. *Hold On To Your Heart* is a bold, pure love letter to a bygone era inked by a sentimental hopeless romantic.

Buoyed by the response to *There is Only You*, the band’s astonishing, life-affirming 2014 third album, The XCERTS were invigorated and inspired to create an 10-track love-letter to hope, belief and aspiration. Whilst the songs are shot through with sheer gutsy determination, they were written in strife but bolstered by a sanguine optimism. The album chronicles Macleod’s descent into the dark and his determination to crawl back into the light.

“The songs are coming from a really bad place,” he says. “I’d become a really empty human being’; It felt like my wires were all lined-up perfectly and colour co-ordinated and as soon as my girlfriend and I broke up, it was like someone had yanked them all out. I couldn’t really relate to anyone, I was struggling to talk to people, I just couldn’t go out and face the world. Fundamentally I just felt completely worthless, I just didn’t know who I was and I didn’t really care about who I was either!”

Despite the dark lyrical content, *Hold On To Your Heart* is musically shot through with a vigorous lust for life, a determination to suffer the slings and arrows and come out the other side stronger than ever before. Like the world’s best songwriters, Murray turned to his guitar in times of trouble, seeking to rejuvenate his own sense of self-worth by soundtracking his woe with an exuberant cacophony of major-key melodies, joyous saxophone and jubilant piano chords. “Once I had this pivotal moment of realising it was time to start living again, I started becoming quite unapologetic for who I am. The album has spawned from all this darkness but I wanted to capture that feeling of triumph over adversity. The title of the record is saying you’re absolutely worth more than the pain you’re experiencing. I really wanted to hammer that home to people; no matter how bad things get, they will get good again. These clouds are going to part and that sun is going to come glaring through! It really is an arm around the listener, that’s how I hear it now.”

These optimistic paeans to carpe diem and taking the bull by the horns couldn’t have been written in a more oppressive environment. After the break up of a relationship with someone Murray was ‘convinced I was going to be with for the rest of my life’, he moved in to a bed-sit that came to be ironically known as ‘The Mansion.’ “It was really dark in there; the walls were

covered in black mould that the owners hadn't bothered to get rid of, they just painted over it. It was a very odd, weird building but despite the surroundings, I wanted to bring myself back and make myself feel better. It inspired me to find hope in the dark I'd been hiding in."

There were more hardships to come; whilst touring *There Is Only You*, the death of Murray's grandmother had a profound effect on him and shortly after her passing, the band suffered another blow when a close mutual friend also passed away. The startling contrast between the highs the band were experiencing from touring a successful record on the road and the lows Murray's family and friends were experiencing at back home proved disconcerting, leading him to the conclusion that he needed to be a rock for loved ones back home. "The idea of people being worth more than the pain they are going through was hugely influenced by needing to be there for my family and friends when they needed support."

Murray may have been in the gutter but his romantic optimism directed his gaze towards the stars. Songs such as *Daydream*, *Feels Like Falling In Love*, *We Are Gonna Live* and the album's title track are rousing odes to living life with a full heart and an open mind. "I really wanted to transport the listener to a certain time and place, just like Springsteen does" says Murray, name-checking one of the album's strongest influences. "I want people to be there with me on the street corners or in the bars or in *The Mansion*; the places where it all went down."

But reconvening with his band mates to write the songs that would eventually find a place on *Hold On To Your Heart* proved to be re-energizing, lighting a spark that ignited fire in their bellies to create something that would fill their lives with light. Their renewed hunger and dogged determination is palpable throughout the record. "The 3 of us needed to create what felt like a life affirming record" Murray says. "There was a real sense of hunger and a drive in wanting to make the songs explode out of the small room we were creating in. The outside world was completely forgotten about each time we stepped into the rehearsal space and in there, it was vital therapy. There were emotional breakdowns and moments of despair, but as always, love and distortion conquered."

The band looked to the classics as a vessel with which to deliver these songs; shying away from contemporary influences and digging into the deep-rooted rich tapestry once weaved by Springsteen and Petty, The XCERTS throw-back to more innocent times, where the boy gets the girl and lives happily ever after. They yearn for a simpler time where dreams were made for living. "We were going for a timeless, stripped back sound," says Murray. "The mantra in the studio was we wanted it to feel classic but have a modern twist, which is not an easy feat to pull off. We wanted people to listen to the record and just think anything's possible; we were trying to capture the ending of (seminal 1985 John Hughes movie) *The Breakfast Club*. It's about that feeling of wanting to be outside and experiencing life; don't sit in your house looking at the girl on Facebook, go get the girl!"

Hold On To Your Heart is a cathartic listen, an exorcism of personal demons scored to an invigorating soundtrack through the eyes of a passionate idealist. The XCERTS writes euphoric anthems about falling in love no matter how bleak the darkness gets. They capture that magical moment where you first fixed eyes with someone across the room and started feeling butterflies at the pit of your stomach. The only music The XCERTS will ever be able to write is going to come straight from the heart and aim straight for the gut. "I am someone who romanticises pretty much everything and anything" he admits "but I also wanted it to be something pure, real and honest. We want to make people feel like anything is possible whilst listening to this record."

The XCERTS are:

Murray Macleod: Vocals / Guitar

Jordan Smith: Bass

Tom Heron: Drums

Remfry Dedman, June 2017