

COLD YEARS – A DIFFERENT LIFE (revised 4 March, 2024)

There are some albums that immediately transcend time and space, regardless of genre, while simultaneously capturing the very moment out of which they were born. It's an incredibly difficult balance to get right, but with their third full-length, Aberdeen's Cold Years have done just that. Because from the moment *A Different Life* blasts off with the pounding beat of opener "Over"—a riotous punk anthem about removing a toxic person from your life—this album manages to make sense of a world that's lost most of it. Simultaneously, it also feels like the record you've been waiting for to fill the void in your life *for* your entire life. That's not to do disservice to the band's two previous albums, 2020's *Paradise* and 2022's *Goodbye To Misery*. Both are heart-torn, emotionally intelligent, perceptive records, but there's something truly special about this one. You can *feel* it in these songs. That's something the band—Ross Gordon (vocals/guitar), Finlay Urquhart (guitar) and drummer Jimmy Douglas—noticed as well.

"This is the first time I've ever come out of a studio able to listen to the tracks, where—and I say this 100% with conviction—we went in and did everything we wanted to do and more," says Gordon. "I've never done that. I've always come out feeling like we could have done something better or different. But this album changed the game for all of us as a band. We're all huge fans of music, and it covers a huge amount of ground. We didn't just do twelve tracks that sound the same. We tried to make things a little different. That happened naturally, and it's the most musical experience I've ever had. I definitely feel a confidence with this record that I didn't feel on the others."

Recorded with Brett Romnes (I Am The Avalanche/Crime In Stereo) at the Barber Shop Studios in Hopatcong, NJ, *A Different Life* sounds confident, too. The band went in with the idea of deliberately making a *rock* record, something increasingly rare these days as the genre has slipped somewhat outside of the mainstream. But it also afforded the band the freedom to test and explore those different waters, both in terms of the genre itself and the band's own sound. After that opening blast of "Over", the record continues with the scorching energy of "Roll With It", a song that boasts one of the most infectious choruses rock music has heard in recent years. 'Instant classic' is a term that gets bandied around far too often these days, but one listen to this song and you swear it's been bubbling in your veins forever. That feeling constantly repeats as the album progresses. The faster, more up-tempo songs like "Radio" (a joyously melancholy track about leaving the small town you grew up in, and people who you grew up with, behind), "Choke" (an incisive invective about the current political state of the UK) and the (self-)contemplative "Youth" all position Cold Years as a band who aren't just ready to take things to the next level, but have reached it already. It's far too easy to imagine those tracks—not to mention the inspiring *carpe diem* of "Let Go" and the snotty, breakneck punk of album closer "Die Tonight"—filling arenas. Indeed, they come off as ready-built for captivating that kind of audience.

But there are also plenty of tender, beautiful moments here too. "Sick", a song that focuses on Gordon's troubles with insomnia and the negative thoughts about himself that arise from it, starts as a slow-burning ballad, but slowly swells into a powerful anthem of defiance. You can already picture the thousands of lighters swaying in time to it. Elsewhere, "Fuck The Weather" is a doo-wop-inspired tribute to Gordon's other half, "Other Side" is a stripped-back acoustic tune that updates the traditional folk ballad for these troubled times while also addressing the personal issues Gordon has endured over the past year, and "Low" is an epic, slow-marching, moody rocker that gives any Green Day song on *American Idiot* a run for its money. And then there's "Goodbye My Friend", which sits, literally and figuratively, at the center of this record. An incredibly personal song, it's riddled with pain and vulnerability and demonstrates how these songs are both intensely personal and universally relatable.

That's another difficult balance to strike, but it's one—once again—that Cold Years have executed with precision, capturing the collective trauma of the pandemic through Gordon's own experiences.

"No-one was going to come out of the last four years in one piece," he says. "It was too fresh on the last record to write. I'm in a much better place than I was when we were writing this album, but it was pretty tough. There are a lot of songs about how you should push a lot of the bullshit aside, and I really try to do that, whether that's people or jobs, or just circumstances that you keep finding yourself in. There's a few songs in there about getting rid of negative people, which is a big thing for me. I was always too scared to do that. I'm a people person—I don't necessarily like every person I meet, but I don't want to piss them off either because I'm not a fan of confrontation."

It also delves deep into his psyche. He's never been afraid to confront his demons, but he does so in unflinchingly honest fashion here.

"I got ground down after COVID," he continues. "Going back to reality and having to put my nose to the grindstone again and work a regular job in the dark for five days a week and just be really fucking miserable, because we weren't getting tour offers that we wanted, we weren't on the road as much as we wanted to be, and it was a really hard time."

That hard time is infused into the blood of this record. It's one which pits the joys of being in a band with the tangible difficulties that come along with it—being on the road constantly, missing the people that you love, being enervated by the necessary tedium of life outside of the band. It was all in much sharper focus too, because the majority of Gordon's friends who *aren't* in the band have been settling into the kind of life that society expects. Compounded by the strains of touring and planning for this new record, it all seemed a bit overwhelming when the band finally got to the studio. Thankfully, they were able to use that tiredness and that overwrought wretched feeling as fuel for the fire, even if it took some time for Gordon to realise what this record is about. So while it might have been rough, the end result is a truly triumphant album that, otherwise, probably wouldn't or couldn't have been written. And that would have been a dreadful shame.

"All of us were fucked when we went into the studio," admits Gordon. "We'd come out of a year of touring, a year of writing, a year of working really hard to make it work financially. We were all broken, but going in there and being in that environment and having good people around us gave us the energy to push through. I look at all my friends who are getting married, settling down and having kids. I'm not ready for the picket fence just yet. This record's about challenging normality and making your own future, because you want a different life to everyone else. You miss a lot doing this—weddings, birthdays, anniversaries—so it's this immense personal sacrifice, but it's absolutely worthwhile."

This album is, beyond any shadow of a doubt, proof of that.