



THE WHISTLES & THE BELLS *MODERN PLAGUES* (NEW WEST RECORDS)

"I wanted to make a record that sounded like some great cosmic dinner party," explains Bryan Simpson (aka The Whistles & the Bells) of his sophomore LP fittingly dubbed *Modern Plagues*. "Not a gross, homogenized one where people bludgeon their intellect with one-sided conversation but more of a 'if you could invite four people from history over for dinner who would it be?' kind of shindig. Where some strange collection of human heavyweights sit around discussing the odd pilgrimage that is life. I wanted to sonically interpret what a cosmic intersection of such varied DNA might sound like. Except fast forward the evening past the pretense and the niceties of the appetizer course and push *record* as the party polishes off the last drop of an encore bottle of wine."

Modern Plagues' 11 expansive tracks find singer / songwriter / producer / multi-instrumentalist Simpson delivering eye-opening lyrical insights and audacious verbal imagery, while displaying a freewheeling sonic sensibility that draws inspiration from a bottomless well of genres and textures. Collaborations with The Raconteurs' Brendan Benson resulted in such out-of-the-box tunes as "Harry Potter," "Small Time Criminals," and "Zombie Heartz," where Simpson's revealing lyrics and richly compelling soundscapes mix to create a singular, personally-charged vision of organized chaos. This extends to remarkably candid tracks like "Year of the Freakout" and "Playing God" when Simpson's satirical observations call into question how we all cope with the turbulent times in which we live; and, more introspectively, to songs such as "Good Drugs" and "Highlight Reel" that sonically grasp, and for that matter, celebrate the fragility and ferocity of man. As the album culminates with the funky, almost playful, apocalyptic closer "40 Years," *Modern Plagues* leaves no deadly sin untouched, no false idol unexposed.

"I wanted to make an immediate record, one that people would get from the first listen," asserts the Nashville-based Fort Worth native. "I was dead set on not making some kind of 'ninja' record, where the enjoyable bloodletting doesn't begin until the fourth listen when it sneaks up out of nowhere and cuts your throat. I wanted to make something more forthright, more honest. I've made records that are slower to blossom, and some of my favorite records are like that. But I wanted this one to jump out and make its point. I want listeners to be able to imagine and feel the spirit of a night where the air is thick with cigar smoke and opinions, brazen jokes and deep truths. With the whimsical, the mundane, and the transcendent all sharing the same bed of nails."

Simpson's route to *Modern Plagues* has been an unconventional one. Prior to launching The Whistles & the Bells, he had already won substantial success as a bluegrass mandolinist, serving a seven-year, three-album stint with the acclaimed progressive-bluegrass quartet Cadillac Sky. That group was

broad-minded enough to collaborate with both bluegrass icon Ricky Skaggs and the Black Keys' Dan Auerbach, which eventually led to an in-demand spot on Mumford and Sons' 2010 North American Tour. Meanwhile, Simpson also carved out a lucrative sideline as a mainstream country songwriter, composing hit tunes for the likes of Tim McGraw, Blake Shelton and George Strait.

With those achievements under his belt, a long-gestating musical and spiritual awakening pushed Simpson in a more iconoclastic direction, resulting in The Whistles & the Bells' independently released self-titled 2014 debut. That album chronicled the artist's bold reassessment of his personal and creative choices, and struck a responsive chord with those fortunate enough to hear it, winning acclaim from such notable outlets as *Rolling Stone* and *American Songwriter*.

"I don't necessarily feel like this is *me*, but it's a portion of me that I'm willing to unveil and explore," Simpson notes. "I could say, 'Go listen to that Bryan Simpson record,' but that idea is just confusing to me. I don't know what Bryan Simpson sounds like, but I'm starting to understand what The Whistles & the Bells sounds like. It's more of an idea than an identity, and I had to get to a certain point in my life where I had the keys to unlock that vault."

The Whistles & The Bells' debut effort won an impressive amount of attention for an indie release, leading to Simpson's current deal with New West Records, which gave the first album a national release and set the stage for *Modern Plagues*.

"The first record was about spiritual transformation, and about me coming to a place of recognition of my own humanity and a better understanding of my place in the universe," Simpson says. "And as much as it has liberated me elsewhere in my life, perhaps the greatest tangible increase has been creatively. I know the record that I probably should have made. The sophomore record that would have been a much easier transition for everybody involved. But we kept asking ourselves: *what record CAN we make?! If there's a sound or an idea we hear, why not chase it?* I want to continue to stir up conversations within myself, and within the people who listen to the music."

For *Modern Plagues*, Simpson collaborated with co-producer/engineer Eddie Spear (Judah & the Lion, Lake Street Dive, Rival Sons), and a crew of like-minded players, including his longtime cohort and former Cadillac Sky member Matt Menefee. In addition to co-writing "Year of the Freakout," Menefee plays banjo, electric guitar, synthesizer, piano and mandocello on the album. Also contributing to the sessions are rising singer/songwriters Brooke Waggoner and Phoebe Cryar, who trade co-lead vocals with Simpson on "Supadope." Many of the album's players will join Simpson when he takes *Modern Plagues* on the road.

“My cosmic dinner party might have ultimately turned out a little more like a muggy Saturday night in Coney Island with Soren Kierkegaard and Malcolm Muggeridge eating hot dogs and nervously climbing in for a second ride on the Tilt-A-Whirl only to exit 40 minutes later the best kind of woozy.” Simpson divulges while reflecting upon the finished work. “But this record is where I openly embrace the weirdness of my existence. Eleven songs, till death do us part. Hope it does something to ya.”