

Mikky Ekko has come home. He recorded his 2015 debut album, *Time*, in places as far-flung as London, Stockholm, and Los Angeles, plus any point on the compass where inspiration struck while he was on tour with Justin Timberlake, One Republic and Jessie Ware. But he wanted to record *Fame*, his next album, in the city that had proved both a permanent address and an inspiration for him since moving there in 2005 to attend college.

It's said that people have lucky cities, a geographic location where they seem to flourish or feel that they are their best selves. Although born in Shreveport, Louisiana, with its rich history of country rock and electric blues, Ekko found such a place in Nashville.

It allowed him the freedom to be who he wanted to be — starting with those early gigs he played at 12th and Porter with slashes of red painted across his chiseled face. It informed the haunting music of his largely a cappella 2009 dreamscape *Strange Fruit*, a five-song EP he recorded while still a student at nearby Middle Tennessee State University that had far more in common with Brian Eno than it did Billie Holiday.

A restless creator — sometimes writing two songs a day, starting most days at 4:45 am — Ekko quickly followed up *Strange Fruit* with two companion EPs the next year: *Reds* and *Blues*. One of the songs on *Reds*, "Who Are You, Really," made its way to underground beatsmith Clams Casino, known mainly for his work with ASAP Rocky, Lil B and The Weeknd. That collaboration set off a series of fortuitous events that eventually led to the song being used on *Teen Wolf*, *Ringer*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *True Blood*, *The Blacklist* and *Reign*.

“Stay,” one of the songs he had written with British songwriter Justin Parker, came to Rihanna’s attention, and she asked if she could include it on her 2012 album, *Unapologetic*. After initially demurring, Ekko not only let the Barbadian singer have the song, but agreed that he would sing it with her, resulting in a Top-10 chart hit, a Grammy nod, more than 10 million sales, a contract with RCA Records, and a relentless touring schedule.

“The whole fairy tale thing lasted almost a year, and then things finally got back to normal. Whatever *that was*,” reveals Ekko. “A lot of people expected me to hit the road with Ri or do more collaborations with other pop people. But that wasn’t what I wanted to do at all. My biggest concern was not letting any of this go to my head, because fame is notoriously a fickle suitor.”

Instead he took his time recording the album he wanted to make, despite urging from his label to get it out quickly to capitalize on the post-Rihanna buzz. Although it began as a dream project, something happened midway through. “I started out making an album I was really excited about. And in some ways there are moments on *Time* where it does feel like I did. But I think something changed.”

Perhaps there were too many cooks in the kitchen. Released in January 2015, *Time* featured Dave Sitek (TV on the Radio), Jeff Bhasker (Mars, Pink), Stargate (Rihanna, Katy Perry), Dennis Herring (the Hives, Modest Mouse), Clams Casino, Ryan Tedder (Adele, OneRepublic) and Benny Blanco (Maroon 5, Rihanna). While well-received, it wasn’t the album he set out to make.

In order to do that, he needed to make some brave decisions. The first was to ask his label to release him from his contract; the second to be unstintingly honest about what had happened to him over the course of the past five years and the vagaries of unexpected success; and the third was to have a single vision this time: his own.

As soon as Ekko decided he was up to the task, songs began materializing out of the ether, demanding to be written, trying to express the often-unsettling trajectory of what happens in the aftermath of immediate celebrity.

“Nobody ever wants to tell the truth about what it’s like, but I felt like I needed to. If I didn’t I felt like I would die a little inside,” confides Ekko.

As a guide he looked to Adele and Lana Del Rey for full emotional disclosure. “The one thing I realized when I listened to Adele’s *21* and Lana’s albums was they’re not playing a role. They’re just saying what’s in their head. You can always tell when something is not genuine or coming from a real place. I held myself to that standard. I feel I’ve exponentially grown as a person over the last five years, and for me, I grow the most musically when I grow as a human.

“‘Bitter’ was the first song I wrote for the album, and ‘Fame’ was the second. I knew immediately that ‘Bitter’ would be the first song — it was how I felt -- and ‘Fame’ would be the last. I knew I wanted to take people on the journey that was my life in between those points: being an artist like so many artists who I won’t say were courageous, but maybe foolish enough to leave their label’s capable hands to find their own way.”

Although it was more than finding his own way -- it was finding his way back to himself. To that idiosyncratic artist with the heart-stopping shape-shifter’s voice who often plucked his songs straight out of his lucid dreaming, songs that were as emotionally subversive and troubling as they were troubled.

He’s a man singing from the inside out, one who wasn’t afraid to self-immolate in order to light the way for others. Part pedagogue, part prophet, part way-shower, and all psychic disrupter. It’s a

theme he returns to on his new album, as on “Light the Way,” a first tentative step toward real self-awareness, if not full redemption. The masterful, almost symphonic sonic collage of “Chasing Daylight” takes it even further, shining a light on some of the things Neil Young was attempting to warn us about on *Rust Never Sleeps*, the lyrics an unsettling echo from rock’s own past: “I should know better than to question right and wrong/but better going up in flames than being dragged along.”

One thing is clear from the onset is that *Fame* makes good on every one of Ekko’s early promises. With *Time*, he tried to make the album that tried to please everyone, instead of the one he needed to make. Now he has. “Anyone can fake it, you can put on hats, you can make cool-ass mixtapes, but at the end of the day you have to look at yourself in the mirror and say this is who I am, and I wanted to give people access to who I am with this album.

“I think with *Time* I cared too much about making the person in the mirror look how he needed to look to make *Time* work. With *Fame* it’s like, f*ck a mirror.”

But it wasn’t just mirrors he was shattering. *Fame* attempts to answer some of life’s big questions, the kinds that have stumped philosophers, statesman, and wayward dreamers for years, finding him balanced on an unsteady fulcrum between doubt and faith, between sin and redemption.

“If I’m going to be honest, the album is me finding my way through a labyrinth, and the emotions that I experienced along the way,” explains Ekko. “I see fame as a really dark beast, and seductive. Like a drug.”

But it’s the way Ekko weans himself off that drug that makes the album so compelling, from the first disembodied chants of “Bitter,”

which crackles with minor-chord anxiety, generational rebellion -- and a quick flash of humor at Lionel Richie's expense -- as he breaks a code of silence about what life is like once you climb down from Valhalla.

"Let You Down," with its hip-hop beats, R&B swoon and anthemic chorus, gives a first-hand account about what a cruel mistress fame can be, warning: "Now don't get too attached to me/Shame, it's a shame that the feeling don't last, oh/Shout out, shout out -- all washed up but you're never clean."

The album travels through even more uncomfortable terrain, passing through most of the seven deadly sins and all five stages of grief, without seeming to mean to. But it's better for that, because often the only way to true healing is by opening up a wound and letting it get some air.

"I sometimes think that this album is a sort of eulogy for me," says Ekko. "But what that means is you have to be willing to kill what you think you were. Or are. To be who you know you need to be.

"You have to just die and be reborn, and that's a song. And maybe it's a sh*t song, but maybe you learn something. Or maybe you don't, but it's a commitment to the process and letting it work."

But it worked much better for Ekko this time. Whereas for *Time* he had written more than 250 songs to get it right, this time he only penned 40, which he whittled down to the final 11.

But mostly, Ekko's goal for this album was a desire for listeners to see inside his head -- to hear what he was hearing, feel what he was seeing, rather like a sonic version of *Being John Malkovich*.

“The last line on ‘Let You Down,’ where I go, ‘It’s funny how you blow up just to let me down,’ was about finally making it to the top and having to say to myself, I am really disappointed in you. You’ve finally made it, haven’t you? There, are you happy? Okay. Can we move the f*ck on, please?”

“The internal dialogue was strong on this one. That’s why I wanted to work with Jay [Joyce], because I hear that sort of thing in this motherf*cker’s stuff. I didn’t have any Plan B. When they asked me who I wanted to produce it I was like, ‘Jay Joyce and Jay Joyce.’ If he won’t do it then I don’t really know who is gonna do it.”

Luckily, Joyce agreed, Ekko pulled up to his Neon Church studio last March, and three months later the album was done.

“I think this time around when I was going in, I got my yin and yang in all the right places,” he laughs. “But really, *Fame* is a truer representation of my sound and my perspective. *Fame* sounds like me not compromising. Never, not once.

“As an artist,” he concludes, “the one thing that has been missing, I want to provide. Am I the light at the end of the tunnel? No, every hour of every day I am digging a tunnel. And there is no light in this tunnel because I’m digging it, going deeper all the time. I’ll be digging forever, but if you want to follow, you can.”