

SHINS OF MORROW

THE SHINS' JAMES MERCER TELLS NICK ARGYRIOU HOW HE LOST INTEREST IN THE BAND UNTIL HIS COLLABORATION WITH DANGER MOUSE IN BROKEN BELLS PAVED THE WAY FOR AN INSPIRED R&B AND NEO-SOUL RETURN.

Line-up changes over a band's career need not necessarily mean that there is instability within the ranks. While it's a fact that The Shins' James Mercer remains the only original member from the Albuquerque, New Mexico-born, now Portland, Oregon-based ensemble after a 15-year run that has spanned four records, he believes modification helps to keep the musical nous circumnavigating at a rate of sonic knots. "The thing I enjoy about it is that you just have these new elements added to your songs and it gives me this new perspective on stuff I've worked so hard to put together," he says of the lifecycle of The Shins.

From the congenial pop of their self-produced 2001 debut *Oh, Inverted World* through to the Phil Ek engineered 2003 cut, *Chutes Too Narrow*, the group were major players alongside the likes of Built To Spill and Washington outfits Modest Mouse and Death Cab For Cutie during this time. But since 2003, only two new records have appeared: 2007's *Wincing The Night Away* and now, 2012's *Port Of Morrow*. While Mercer has been kept busy collaborating with Danger Mouse (AKA Brian Burton) in *Broken Bells*, has flown past the 40-years-of-age mark and fathered two children, The Shins are still very much on the man's creative radar, but it was touch-and-go there for a while as to whether Mercer had the drive to continue.

Once touring rounds for *Wincing The Night Away* had ended in mid-2008, and after The Shins' three-record contract had expired with Seattle's Sub Pop, Mercer admits that he had grave doubts. "I just wasn't that excited to go back into the studio for The Shins after the *Wincing The Night Away* tour," he says. "I did have the feeling that I wanted to do something different but I really didn't know what until Brian brought up the idea of doing the band with him, but it certainly was a possibility in my mind that I wouldn't do The Shins again."

Port Of Morrow is The Shins' first non-Sub Pop record and is released on Mercer's own Aural Apothecary label through Columbia Records/Sony. Recorded throughout 2011 in Los Angeles, California and the

band's hometown of Portland, Oregon, this is an album that traverses electronica textures, big guitars, slow-burn harmony-based reverb and falsetto plus industrial musical kinks that have been shaved in during the final mix. It's a welcome return and quite a left-field approach that's driven by Mercer's desire to continue surrounding himself with creative virtuosos. "I come up with the big ideas of the songs and the lyrical structures but it's really the people around me like Greg [Kurstin, the record's producer] and the influence I gained from Brian that help to flesh it out and make it cool," says Mercer.

After the difficulties Mercer experienced when self-producing *Wincing The Night Away*, external producers have since been the norm in a more concrete, official capacity. From Joe Chiccarelli, Ek, Burton and now Kurstin, Mercer is more than willing to hand over production pedals for the greater good. "One of the great things about Greg is that he is such a terrific player and pulls out a lot of cool stuff on *Port Of Morrow*; he's a big part of the record," explains Mercer of the esteemed US songwriter/musician/producer who aside from being one half of The Bird & The Bee, has played live with Beck, Yusuf Islam and Flaming Lips as a pianist and multi-instrumentalist while producing/songwriting with mostly female artists ranging from Peaches to Lily Allen, Kylie Minogue and Sia.

That distinctive Mercer propensity for fashioning catchy pop narratives remains with much of *Port Of Morrow* delivering introspective, windswept porch songs with a twist. Lyrically, Mercer admits that there are a "number of love songs for my wife" found throughout his latest record, including the customary relationship stream of consciousness and also one about Mercer dealing with moving to the US from Germany as a sixth-grader. And that's Mercer – always evolving – yet when he entered the studio last January he had no inkling in which direction to take the album. "When I started to write I really didn't know what I was going to do," he admits. "I was wondering and debating and knew I had certain songs I wanted to complete and other ones I wasn't sure on and that debate was going on until I met up with Greg in California for the first time."



In preparation for that initial Kurstin meeting, Mercer took with him an idea for a surprising R&B number that would later become the penultimate track on the album. In keeping with this high-register croon, the title track of *Port Of Morrow* is one of many another songs that catch Mercer hitting the soulful notes a la Curtis Mayfield. "I played him the barebones of that early R&B number that would become *40 Mark Strasse*; it had bass guitar, acoustic guitar and a scratch vocal track so he took it and went over to an old vintage analogue synthesiser and string emulator and began laying down some paths with it," says Mercer. Those paths evolved into what Mercer can only describe as "this weird Bowie from the '70s or Gary Numan-type feel" before confessing that this was the stage where his thrill for The Shins came flooding back.

Appropriating sounds from mid-to-late '70s German outfits and the high-tech instrumentation that was used at the time to craft their kosmische resonances, the pair set about pulling influence from Mercer's alliance with Danger Mouse in *Broken Bells* and capitalising on Kurstin's wall-to-wall workshop equipment plus the man's own studio intellect. "Oh yeah, Greg owns a lot of this gear, like music sequencers and synths and luckily he knows how to play them; it all started coming out great," he beams.

WHO: The Shins

WHAT: *Port Of Morrow* (Aural Apothecary/Sony)