**The War on Drugs, *A Deeper Understanding***

Three and a half years distant from the release of The War on Drugs’s universally acclaimed 2014 record *Lost in the Dream* comes *A Deeper Understanding,* a testament to the ambitious art of album making and modern rock and roll.

For the better part of that period, the band’s frontman and driving force, Adam Granduciel, led the charge for his Philadelphia-based sextet, persevering through both triumph and struggle as he holed up in studios on both American coasts to write, record, edit, and tinker—but, above all, to busy himself in work. Teaming up with engineer Shawn Everett (Alabama Shakes, Weezer), Granduciel challenged the notion of what it means to create a fully realized piece of music in today’s modern landscape. Calling on his bandmates continuously throughout the process, the result is a “band record” in the noblest sense, featuring collaboration, coordination, and confidence on each level and at every turn. Through those years of relocation, the revisiting and reexamining of endless hours of recordings, unbridled exploration and exuberance, and even acute physical pain, Granduciel’s gritty love of his craft succeeded in pushing the band to great heights while creating The War on Drugs’s finest work to date.

For Granduciel, the writing process for *A Deeper Understanding*’s creation can be traced to early spring 2015, having been on tour for a year straight promoting *Lost in the Dream*. In an effort to take advantage of the band’s road-tested tightness, he booked some studio time in between Coachella appearances that April to record his new ideas as a unit, and with the long-form firmly in mind. “Whenever I work, I’m always thinking in an album context,” Granduciel says. “It’s important for me that I’m always working. Some people will ask why I don’t take a break, but I feel like I did take a break when we were touring; your creative mind kind of goes to sleep on the road. I’m always very anxious to get back in with new songs and see what’s there.”

Following the tour’s end that fall, Granduciel moved to Los Angeles while the rest of the band headed back east. He locked out the LA-area Sonora Recorders studio as a permanent space in which to work, trucking his gear down the coast and getting to work immediately on new demos. Every month and a half, drummer Charlie Hall, bassist Dave Hartley, and keyboardist Robbie Bennett would join him in LA to work for a week at a time. Although Granduciel thinks firmly of The War on Drugs as a six-piece (including multi-instrumentalists Jon Natchez and Anthony LaMarca), he remains open about the flexible definition of the band itself and what they were creating.

“I wanted it to be more of a band record in terms of the confidence within each player,” he says. And while his bandmates are by now used to rising to the challenges set by their leader, Granduciel tends to expect a high standard when it comes to studio hours logged. “I’ve realized that I take for granted how much I love being in the studio,” he says. “I love the trial and error, but for some people it’s understandably daunting, and it can be vague to tell somebody to do something ‘just by feeling.’ And even though we had developed a live camaraderie, I wanted to use people whose playing I loved and had worked with before.”

In addition to the revolving arsenal of friends and former bandmates, Granduciel began meeting with Everett in LA to discuss music and philosophies on recording. Having contacted the engineer based on an appreciation for his résumé, Granduciel found the personality match he was looking for and the pair began working together that June. Joined by the band at Sonora, they cut near-final and mostly live versions of two songs, “Pain” and “Thinking of a Place,” on the first night of work—a landmark for the band.

Granduciel continued working in various studios with a clear mind and matching goal, including time spent mostly alone in studios in New York. A bigger picture vision of the thematic meaning behind what he was making had surfaced, including how his personal experiences while shaping the album were fitting into that arc as well. “A lot of the most magical stuff in that last month was just me working for a week at a time by myself, and adding what I knew needed to be added,” he says. “We ended up with a pretty good snapshot of my ambition, and also the focus that maybe I wasn’t able to give at all times. There’s a story in the record about opening up your eyes and looking at your life and wondering how to hold onto the things that only you know make you *you*.”

While the practice of recording and working on music given time and experience can become, at the very least, more familiar, Granduciel does not believe that the art of making an album ever simplifies. “It doesn’t get easier. Being more prepared and dialed in on songs everyone knew made it more enjoyable, but getting them to a certain spot—or trying to arrive at a mood and to sift through all the material—was just as hard as it always has been. It’s a fun process—it was fun last time, too—but for me it’s such a fleeting thing, feeling like you’ve invested enough time and energy into an album to the point where you can live with it being everybody else’s. Maybe part of it is just going through that experience so that you can learn to let it go, while making sure you went down every road that you thought you could.”

The resulting mood of *A Deeper Understanding* is one of cohesive harmony. Amidst all those years of tape, sweat, and dedication, ten rock and roll songs remain—some of which had been there all along, just beneath the surface. “Sometimes you just have to plug a mic in, press record, and plug away,” he says. “Some of the most important stuff I got out of the record was when I was the most frustrated by the process.” By immersing himself in his work, as well as to celebrate the simple joy of being in a band with his best friends, Granduciel knows how to find himself just as well as he knows how to lead his band to a song. From the bouncy, pulsing drive of the bass line on “Holding On,” with the song’s chiming keys and distorted synth breakdown washing over shimmery chords and elastic, stretchy lead guitar, to the tape loops and mournful harmonica blasts of “In Chains,” to the buzz-and-throb and fuzzed-out guitar artillery on “Up All Night,” *A Deeper Understanding* truly cooks, and paints a portrait of a modern rock and roll band actualizing their full potential and intention. Perhaps the lesson of the album is that of learning to let go and to recognize what has been present all along.

“The point of the record is watching yourself move between different versions of yourself,” he says, “and trying to either hold onto or figure out which one you’re more comfortable being—which version of yourself are you most true to?”

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