

Grouplove
Big Mess

Turns out that a big mess can actually be a good thing. In the case of Grouplove's third studio album, *Big Mess* refers not only to a lyric in the buoyant lead single "Welcome To Your Life," but also to the situation in which they found themselves when they got off the road following 2013's *Spreading Rumours*. For the first time since releasing their breakthrough 2011 debut, *Never Trust A Happy Song*, Grouplove were back in Los Angeles indefinitely, with a lot of catching up to do. "We got off tour and realized we had been completely neglecting normal life," says singer and keyboard player Hannah Hooper. "We were out of touch with friends and family, our house looked like we were hoarders -- it was like an explosion of so much at once."

In the midst of it all, Hooper and Grouplove singer/guitarist Christian Zucconi, who have been a couple since the band's inception, found out they were going to have a baby. Like the true pair of artists they are, Zucconi and Hooper viewed the chaos as an opportunity to be creative. "We felt so out of control. Instead of trying to deal with the mess, we just started writing," Hooper explains. "We had so many songs come out of that, and *Big Mess* is a collection of our favorites."

The album's opening track, "Welcome To Your Life," was one of close to forty songs that began in that messy moment. Hooper recorded the hook -- "we're back in business, you're such a big mess, and I love you" -- on her laptop, but the rest of the tune took awhile to come into focus. Months later, on the same day that Hooper went into labor, the joyfully defiant chorus came to Rabin in the shower, like a bolt from the blue. Says Rabin: "I showed them the idea and when we put those two parts together, they fit perfectly, both lyrically and melodically. It almost felt a bit fated."

There has been the tinge of fate to Grouplove since the beginning, when its five original members met at an arts colony on the island of Crete and formed such an immediately comfortable bond -- both personally and musically -- that they started the band upon their return to LA in 2010. Though Sean Gadd left Grouplove amicably in 2014, new bassist Daniel Gleason says he connected to the familial spirit of the band right away. Describing the vibe in the studio during sessions for *Big Mess*, Gleason says: "It was really open and honest. I've never been a part of an environment where everyone was willing to be so selfless if it made the song better. The lack of pride or ego allows the best ideas to drift to the top, and that's rare, but I think that's what makes the band what it is."

While those core qualities remain, Grouplove continues to mature on *Big Mess*, which demonstrates their ever sharper instincts as songwriters and their growing ability to make a bright, bold, genre-defying sound that is entirely their own. The band members say they feel most inspired when they're collaborating on new ideas with a completely open mind. "What influences us the most is each other," says Zucconi. "Even a song you that think might come out a certain way will be completely reimagined by someone like Andrew or Ryan or Dan, because their tastes and inclinations are so different."

"It's always been sort of a rule for us is that we want the writing process and studio process to be spontaneous," says drummer Ryan Rabin, who has been Grouplove's in-house producer since their earliest recordings -- tracks including their platinum-certified 2011 single "Tongue-Tied," as well as alternative radio mainstays "Colours" and "Ways To Go." (As part of production team Captain Cuts, Rabin has also produced and/or written tracks for Tove Lo and Jennifer Lopez, among others.) "Most of our best stuff has come from letting the song dictate the moment rather than forcing it into some preconceived sonic space," says Rabin. "We've stuck to that process because we're in love with that spontaneity."

Rabin's recording technique -- "using the studio as a writing instrument, to elevate the song to where it couldn't have gone otherwise" -- serves Grouplove perfectly on *Big Mess* tracks including "Welcome To Your Life" and the anthemic "Do You Love Someone?," among others. But the band also wanted to challenge themselves on this album by working with someone new, and they found the ideal partner in Phil Ek, who produced five *Big Mess* tracks and whose approach in the studio is the polar opposite of Rabin's. Among indie rock's most beloved producers, Ek has worked on albums by Band of Horses, The Shins, Built To Spill and Father John Misty. "Built To Spill's *Keep It Like A Secret* -- when that record came out, it hit me so hard," says Zucconi. "And since then I've been a fan of his work. I love the sounds he gets."

The band previously teamed with Ek to record a song for the soundtrack to *Paper Towns*, and embraced the opportunity to return to his Seattle studio. "Few producers care so intimately about every minute sonic element of their production like Phil does," says guitarist Andrew Wessen, "and it shows in the warmth of his tones and the organic clarity of the soundscapes."

"It was fun to explore stuff with Phil that we hadn't done with Ryan," says Zucconi. "Phil is really known for his guitar tones, and he'd spend hours getting the right tone. We started calling it 'Tone Questing.' It became a running joke in the studio. We even bought tunics and swords and made Phil wear a cape, and got a chainmail shirt for his assistant Cameron to wear. We found this really funny, medieval song we'd play while we were killing time to make everyone laugh."

Of the songs recorded in Seattle with Ek, Hooper points to "Traumatized" as her favorite. "It has kind of a raw, Nirvana feel to it which I really like," says Hooper, who wrote the song with Zucconi in their LA home. "The lyrics discuss realizing what our parents gave up so we could become what we've become, and how much they've sacrificed," she says. "When you're an artist, you're stuck in this interesting, child-like state, but I wrote that song in a moment of understanding that we were gonna have to pull it together to raise a family."

Grouplove unanimously cite the haunting, cathartic "Enlighten Me" as a linchpin moment on the album. Lyrics such as "I don't feel my life is real / I'm on the fence with common sense," capture a sentiment all five members of the band felt a personal connection to, even though the words and song were written by Zucconi. Says Wessen: "This album embodies the headspace that we all collectively share as band mates, as new parents and as human beings. I think these songs have a shared consciousness that we've never been able to capture as a band."

“It’s a real rare thing, how we came together,” says Zucconi, reflecting on what keeps Grouplove’s outlook so positive, even after all they’ve experienced and accomplished. “There was this energy we had all been looking for, for years before we met. And it came together so effortlessly with this group of people. It’s still totally there and happens whenever we play shows. The energy is even stronger now. We all bring out the best in each other musically, and it helps me to grow and become a better person, being around the vibe of this band.”

Big Mess is out September 9 on Canvasback Music/Atlantic.