USERx Bio 2020

USERx is the beautifully warped brainchild of Matt Maeson and Rozwell, two hometown friends from wildly different musical backgrounds. A singer/songwriter known for his gritty yet soul-baring storytelling, Maeson got his start playing in maximum-security prisons across the country as a teenager, while Rozwell grew up performing in the school orchestra and later made his name as a hyper-inventive producer with a penchant for futuristic hip-hop. During an impromptu session at Rozwell’s mom’s house back in 2015, the Virginia Beach natives spontaneously came up with a track called “User”—a moody collision of kinetic beats and jagged guitar tones, perfectly embodying the pure freedom of their partnership.

“Making that song was the first time I ever felt completely free to express myself however I wanted, both sonically and in the lyrics, and right away it felt kind of addicting to work like that,” says Maeson. “When I was producing for Matt early on, there was always this feeling that I needed to enter his world,” adds Rozwell, who’s long served as Maeson’s creative director. “But when we did ‘User’ it felt like its own thing: it wasn’t rap, it wasn’t alternative, it wasn’t like anything I’d ever heard before—and that’s always a special moment when you’re making something.”

As their careers took off in the coming years -- Maeson’s 2019 debut album Bank On The Funeral yielded two Billboard #1 hit singles at alt radio in "Cringe" and “Hallucinogenics”, while Rozwell's 2018 debut Zeus I.S V.1 EP garnered support everywhere from Zane Lowe to Pigeons & Planes -- the two musicians kept on trading song ideas, slowly assembling USERx’s self-titled debut EP. Featuring guest spots from Pusha T, Masego and Manchester Orchestra, *USERx* finds the duo sharing lead vocal duties, with Rozwell handling all programming and production. At turns dreamlike and volatile, brooding and frenetic, the result is a deliberately unvarnished canvas for their candidly detailed songwriting. “A lot of this project has to do with our interactions with drug culture,” Rozwell points out. “I’ve had multiple friends pass away because of situations with drugs, and it’s important to us to let people know that it’s something that affects everybody. I don’t want anyone to ever feel like they’re going through that shit alone.”

On their debut single “Waterman,” USERx present a potent introduction to their sound and sensibilities. “The chorus to that song came from being drunk on tour and having an epiphany that I needed to just go get some water,” Maeson recalls. “It’s such a simple idea but there was something very sincere about it.” Threaded with stark and soulful guitar work, “Waterman” spins a strangely tender narrative of desperation and fragile hope, drawing much of its hypnotic power from Rozwell’s use of primal drumbeats. “I tried all different drums but ended up going with something simple that gave it this very human element,” he says. “This whole project is experimental by nature, so I’m mostly just following my intuition—it’s about whatever hits me right in the moment.”

Throughout *USERx*, Maeson and Rozwell match their unfiltered expression with the kaleidoscopic musicality they’ve honed their whole lives. Raised by parents who played in heavy metal bands in his early childhood and who later started a prison ministry, Maeson took up guitar at age 15 and soon moved on to writing his own songs, at one point traveling the country with just his guitar and a notebook. Meanwhile, Rozwell played cello and drums in the school orchestra at the urging of his mother (a singer who’d performed in a barbershop quartet), and at age 12 taught himself to make beats, quickly becoming enchanted with the art of sampling (“I’d go on YouTube and spend hours and hours listening to really obscure stuff like German funk—I was obsessed,” he notes). After crossing paths through the local music scene in the early 2010s, the two started teaming up on myriad projects, with Rozwell producing an early version of Maeson’s “Grave Digger”—the breakthrough hit that led to his signing a joint deal with Neon Gold/Atlantic Records in 2016. With Maeson now based in Austin and Rozwell in L.A., each musician has since come to rely on USERx as an ever-evolving outlet for their most outlandish creative impulses.

Made partly at Virginia Beach Recording Arts (fka Thomas Crown Studios, where Timbaland worked with artists like Missy Elliott), *USERx* in many ways marks a full-circle moment for Maeson and Rozwell. To that end, the EP contains standout cuts like “Above,” an East Coast rap-leaning track graced with guest verses from fellow Virginia Beach-bred artists West Banks and Masego. Another Virginia Beach native, Pusha T turns up on “My Body Left My Soul,” a softly haunting meditation adorned with distorted samples of Rozwell’s screaming. For the brilliantly unhinged “Headsick,” USERx enlisted Manchester Orchestra’s Andy Hull, who lent a new urgency to the song’s raw catharsis. “Andy came up with the idea of adding this huge chorus at the end,” says Maeson. “It turned into two minutes of screaming over these crazy power chords, and it feels like the rock song I’ve always wanted to write.” And on “Heavy Heavy,” the duo deliver *USERx*’s most uptempo track, its electrifying riff lifted from a voice memo recorded in Maeson’s closet. “I used to write in my closet so no one could hear me, and once I had that riff the song came together fast,” he says. “It’s about this time I smoked spice when I was working construction, and then fell off the roof and onto someone’s car—it made sense to write about that situation once I had a riff like that.”

In reflecting on the making of their debut, USERx point to a certain purpose behind their wayward sound. “There’s a lot of kids out there who need a home in a cultural sense—the kids who aren’t necessarily accepted by the rap world or the alternative world, and feel out of place everywhere they go,” says Rozwell. “We want to create some kind of tribe for all the people who check that box that says ‘other.’” And in their lyrics, USERx aim to deepen that solidarity by being unapologetically open about the decisions they’ve made and damage they’ve endured. “Growing up in church, it always seemed strange to me that it was unacceptable to talk about these kinds of things in music,” says Maeson. “By being honest and unashamed about my experiences, I want to help other people realize that they can do what I did: they can learn from their past and move on, and make something out of what they’ve gone through. I think there’s a lot of hopefulness in that.”