A black background with white spots

Description automatically generated

The irresistible appeal of songwriting is the opportunity to give voice to the ineffable. For NewDad-singer/guitarist Julie Dawson, music has always served as a safe haven for articulating what she struggles to express elsewhere – a place where she can explore her deepest emotions without compromise.

“I'm buried under blankets / Descending into madness / And there's no escape from the thoughts burned in my brain,” she coos on recent single ‘In My Head’, her confessions cocooned within Sean O’Dowd’s gauzy guitar textures. More widescreen in its scope than their previous releases, the song heralded the start of an ambitious new era for the Galway-formed four-piece. That vision is ultimately realised on *Madra*, NewDad’s hotly-anticipated debut for Atlantic Records.

Produced by long-time collaborator Chris Ryan (Just Mustard, Arborist) at Rockfield Studios – with additional sessions at RAK Studios – it’s an album characterised by intoxicating, festival-ready melodies spanning dream-pop, post-punk and shoegaze. Where NewDad’s early releases saw Dawson impressionistically obscuring specifics by leaning on lyrical motifs like the sea, this 11-song collection is much more direct thematically. Openly examining her predilection for shame, guilt and self-sabotage – and how that ultimately impacts the people surrounding her – *Madra* is testament to Dawson’s vast creative growth.

It’s a songwriting journey that began at the age of nine, when Dawson took up guitar after falling for Mexican guitar duo Rodrigo y Gabriela via her parents’ record collection. Having developed her skills at various School of Rock-style summer camps, she formed her first band at school, as part of a final year music project, recruiting classmates Áindle O’Beirn on bass and Fiachra Parslow on drums. After consulting a random band name generator for their moniker, NewDad were born, with O’Dowd joining in early 2020, and bassist Cara Joshi later taking over from O’Beirn in 2022.

Collectively, the band’s key musical touch points include The Cure circa *Seventeen Seconds* and *Doolittle*-era Pixies, alongside the work of Wolf Alice, Men I Trust, Sorry, Beabadoobee and Dundalk-outfit Just Mustard. Indeed, watching the success of the latter proved particularly influential in helping them widen their horizons.

“Seeing a small Irish band making amazing music without compromise go on to support The Cure was such a big moment for us,” Dawson recalls. “We were like, maybe we actually could do this?”

Certainly the last three years have substantiated that hunch. Since self-releasing debut single ‘How’ in 2020, NewDad have released two acclaimed EPs, opened for Inhaler and Wet Leg at Fairview Park and played arenas with Paolo Nutini. And as their audience has grown, so too has the scope of their ambition sonically.

Where their earliest bedroom recordings ‘Swimming' and 'Cry’ were characterised by an almost subaqueous murkiness, subsequent releases have presented a sharper, more lush sound. Written while living together during lockdown and recorded at the Belfast studio of their regular producer Chris Ryan, 2021’s *Waves* EP put NewDad on a map with a sound that extended from the swirling shoegaze of ‘I Don’t Recognise You’ to the tearstained dream-pop of ‘Blue’. 2022 follow-up, *Banshee*, fine-tuned that formula further, offering incandescent melodies wrapped in undulating waves of reverb. Produced once more by Chris Ryan, the EP featured additional mixing by John Congleton (St. Vincent, Phoebe Bridgers).

The foundations for *Madra* were laid around this time, with half of the album written in Galway, and the rest completed after the band relocated to London. Dawson drew on that sense of disorientation and insecurity in her lyrics, delving into the darker reaches of her psyche. And yet, whether tackling lived experiences of heartbreak, exploring her own mental health struggles or taking inspiration from cinema, Dawson continues to achieve catharsis by sharing her experiences. In doing so she inspires a similar journey for listeners.

“People come to us and they're like, your songs have really helped me through a tough time,” Dawson explains, proudly. “I love that we can do that for people, and that we can instil them with confidence, just like my favourite songwriters have always done for me.” *Madra* is set to do just that, offering listeners an opportunity to cleanse themselves of painful emotions by transforming that struggle into something transcendent.

Powered by a claustrophobic, Kim Deal-esque bassline and chiming guitar, the minor key atmospherics of album-opener ‘Angel’ prove the perfect foil for Dawson’s ethereal vocal, which details a damaged relationship, initially inspired by that of Rue and Jules’ in *Euphoria*. “I don't want you to drown inside of me, it's not fair to be your responsibility,” she sighs in the cinematic chorus, self-deprecatingly drawing parallels with Rue’s predicament.

These ideas of unworthiness carry into ‘Change My Mind’, a slice of deceptively balmy dream-pop redolent of The Sundays. Over jangling guitar arpeggios, Dawson confesses, “I can sense the madness creeping its way back in, or maybe it's just waking / Maybe it never left, has been eating away my flesh, ‘cause I never tried to get better."

Thematically, ‘Where I Go’ is darker still, examining Dawson’s experiences being bullied at school. “They take and take but I’m the one who’s made mistakes,” she murmurs over reverb-drenched guitars, acknowledging a life-long propensity for blaming herself for situations out of her control.

But there is light to be found amongst the darkness. Over a backdrop of shimmering strings, undulating guitar and bodhrán, ‘White Ribbons’ finds Dawson marvelling at the human body’s ability to repair and renew. Discussing unrequited love, the Rob Brinkmann-assisted ‘Dream Of Me’ is arguably NewDad’s poppiest moment yet, occupying a similar sonic space to 2022’s ‘Say It’. Meanwhile the ‘Just Like Honey’-esque ‘Nosebleed’ was co-written with Lana Del Rey-collaborator Justin Parker, and utilises lush layers of guitar to stunning effect.

The collection concludes with the shoegaze epic ‘Madra’, its title taken from the Gaelic for “dog”. “It was the first song we wrote for the album, and it really encapsulates what we’re about,” says Dawson of the track today. Consolidating ideas of low self esteem and shame, it’s a powerfully raw conclusion to a record that never seeks to offer easy answers. Indeed, Dawson views *Madra* as a safe space for self-reflection and ultimately growth.

“I want people to listen and relate and feel like it can help them,” she smiles. “Because, honestly, it’s helped me a lot.”