It might seem as though things happened very quickly for Divorce. The Nottingham four-piece, who once described themselves as “Wilco meets Abba”, formed in the pandemic and played their first gig supporting TV Priest in October 2021. That led to them becoming labelmates at Hand in Hive (alongside the likes of Dama Scout and Tancred) who released their debut single in February 2022, the on-edge country-punk escape anthem Services. Their debut EP, Get Mean, arrived that December: less an intentionally curated collection than a breathless attempt at containing their first four singles, in and of itself a portrait of a band developing in real time – and one that earned them BBC Radio 6 playlisting and acclaim across the UK music press.

“We were kind of chasing our tails for the first few months,” says guitarist and joint songwriter Felix Mackenzie-Barrow, 26. “We didn’t expect to make another single so quickly after Services. We wanted to do all these things but the four of us were all working and didn’t have any money, we were funding it out of our pockets. We’d never been in a project before where people were like, ‘OK, what’s next?’ We were like, ‘Oh shit! OK – are we allowed? OK, really?’”

Part of the disbelief stemmed from the fact that Divorce have actually been at this quite a long time. Felix and fellow songwriter Tiger Cohen-Towell, 25, met as teenagers at Nottingham’s Television Workshop drama group. They were both playing music solo at the time – Felix a folkier project, Tiger often leading a group of her dad’s confused jazz mates through her self-written songs and singing solo at weddings – and discovered in each other kindred spirits and a shared taste for an inside joke. “I knew from the beginning that we were going to be friends for a really long time, and work together,” says Tiger.

They were both trying to make it as actors – Felix had bit parts in Vera and a television adaptation of Little Women starring Angela Lansbury and Maya Hawke – but felt frustrated at the way “being fulfilled creatively wasn’t really in my own hands. It led to me feeling really bad about myself a lot of the time.” Music, however, offered more instant gratification, and at 17 or so, the duo came together as Megatrain. They benefited from forming at a healthy time for the Nottingham DIY scene, with bands like Kagoule and Dog Is Dead finding some national acclaim, “but I think we were never totally immersed enough to be able to feel like we had any clue of how you would get to that point,” says Tiger.

On stage, they tried hard to make a sound greater than the sum of their parts, but were often left stressed by a lack of technical knowledge. “We’d turn up with equipment that was really cobbled together,” says Felix.

“We had a Bag for Life full of leads that were really important,” Tiger remembers. “And then we lost them all before a support show the next day.”

Just as Megatrain were getting going, the pandemic struck. Tiger was in Nottingham, Felix 200 miles away in Somerset, living with his girlfriend’s parents. Both were out of work – Felix’s acting dried up, and Tiger was furloughed for a year from her job at Nottingham’s beloved Broadway cinema. “I didn’t recognise at the time how lucky I was because everything was happening in real time,” she says, with the careful caveat that lockdown wasn’t as kind to many. “I had so much time to just sit and write and not get any perspective on it. But the sheer amount that I was working that songwriting muscle really helped hone those skills.” (She also did an access course that got her into uni, having dropped out of her A-levels.)

A friend ran a songwriting exercise – five songs in five days – and the pair wrote the song John, about a couple struggling financially. They produced it with Kasper Sandstrøm, 27, guitarist of Notts punks Do Nothing, intending it as a collaboration between both bands. It worked well, reigniting a spark they felt Megatrain had lost as momentum slowed. “It was a catalyst for us going: maybe Kasper would be a good person to talk to about a band because he was super involved and super enthusiastic,” says Felix. He joine on drums and they drafted guitarist Adam Peter Smith, 32, who they knew from teenage drinking and gigging at Nottingham’s legendary Bodega, and – after lots of long walks in that weird third lockdown – settled on the name Divorce.

Admittedly that *is* when things started moving quickly. Audiences fell for their warm yet “desperate” country theatrics, inspired by Tiger and Felix’s teenage origins. “I think there had to be humour in it,” says Tiger. “A lot of our art reflects how repetitive and pathetic the human condition can be, and how our emotions dictate almost everything we do despite them being quite silly and simple a lot of the time. I think that’s quite funny, and our costumes” – suits, wigs, sometimes crop tops for the boys – “brings a vulnerability to it. It all means something within the project, we’re not just trying to be the most flamboyant or eye-catching.”

There was also the matter of the writing, inspired as much by US playwright Tracy Letts as Mitski. The songs on Get Mean are filled with road songs and a sense of perpetual motion often thwarted by broken-down cars, plus characters desperate to make it, to be heard and seen for who they are. It reflects their “kind of manic” first forays into music as a career, says Felix.

They tried to do everything themselves, “like the Chuckle Brothers”, says Felix, remembering one day when Tiger and Felix were moving house, Felix was starting work at 6am the next day in the midst of releasing the single Pretty. “You *have* to be romantic about it otherwise you’ll just stop,” says Tiger, “because it’s so draining.”

Their endurance paid off. Checking Out rose up the playlist at 6 Music, and the band signed with Sub Pop for publishing. Unsurprisingly, this period of rapid transformation fuels their debut EP for new EMI imprint Gravity. Heady Metal is a striking portrait of insecurity and not knowing if you can trust oneself or your new surroundings, the product of a closer collaboration than ever between Felix and Tiger. (“Instead of trying to focus on a theme or a concept,” she says, “we were like, ‘Let’s just put our fucking best writing into this.’”) The character studies of Get Mean are gone; in their place more vulnerable narratives about grappling with identity amid the new pressures they were experiencing.

Birds, for example, addresses people taking interest after years of being ignored. At first it’s nervy and hesitant, then it explodes into a rushing chorus: “I wanna be beautiful! I wanna be good to myself,” they yearn. “There’s a lot of body image anxieties, weirdly, in that song,” says Felix. “I’d be wearing a crop top for a photo shoot and like the things that it drew out of my personality, but it allowed me to tap into some insecurities about how I was looking. It’s strange to be in a very masculine body but out of that very normal male context.” Similarly, Eat My Words, a lurching, wracked country waltz, is about “questioning emotions you feel in a situation that you're not comfortable in, then coming away from it and being really frustrated by your inability to deal with it,” he says.

Right on Time – think St Vincent as an addled country doyenne – was written by Tiger about her first experience of queer relationships, having shied away from her identity as a teenager. “I was feeling very out of sorts because of how quickly I decided to change my own life. I fast-tracked presenting the way I wanted to present and being in the relationship I suddenly felt I needed to be in. It’s about looking at myself and going through that ‘second puberty’ that’s part of the queer experience of coming out later, though it can be applied to any sort of situation where you feel this mixture of self-loathing, but also feeling really liberated; needy but independent.”

She contemplates a minute. “I think we both love reflecting on what losers we are in our songs,” says Tiger. “I just think it’s funny and I don’t mind admitting what a loser I am.”

“You’re *such* a loser as well,” Felix says lovingly.

Despite these anxieties, their musical confidence has grown hugely. Sex and the Millennium Bridge is a brooding waltz that steadily gathers its mettle. “I wrote the first half when I was in my last relationship and the second half when I was out of it,” says Tiger. “It’s about looking back on something, an era that did serve you, and thanking it, kissing it goodbye and moving on.” Meanwhile Heaven, which finds Felix reflecting on hazy childhood memories, goes full on Purple Rain by the end, a decision informed by Tiger’s association of the song with Wim Wenders’ Wings of Desire, “this image of angels flying over a big European city”, and Scratch Your Metal, a love song in which Tiger is “looking at my own bullshit and habits in relationships”, is a synthy banger because “I wanted to show that was something Divorce could do.”

Divorce are now at a stage where the ground is a bit more stable beneath their feet. “It’s exciting to be able to plan ahead and not be so hand to mouth,” says Felix.

“It feels like now it’s a career, even though it always was,” says Tiger. “We’re very restless people. That isn’t going to stop but I kind of don’t want it to. It feeds inspiration to be constantly moving, and maybe it’s chaotic and isn’t sustainable forever. But for now it works. And I don’t think I’d want to live another way. We were still for so long, it’s nice to be able to see and do as much as you can.”

**For more on info contact** **warren@chuffmedia.com**