“It’s taken us ten years and five albums to finally become the band we were always meant to be,” says James Veck-Gilodi. Despite the impressive legacy Deaf Havana have built for themselves over the past decade, they’ve no interest in trading on past glories. Why would you, when the future is so exciting?

His brother Matty goes on to explain that Deaf Havana had always written music “with an eye on appeasing other people. Thing is, I don’t think there’s any reason to be in a band, and it not be your favourite thing.” Their new album sees them writing from a place of joy. “Why has it taken us so long to write the songs we want to hear,” he asks.

They’re aware of the cliché but the siblings believe the new album ‘The Present Is A Foreign Land’ is the best thing they’ve ever made. A record that isn’t afraid of what other people might think, or where it sits in the wider rock scene, the twelve tracks are confident, cathartic and celebratory. Dealing in the expected and the surprising, it’s the album they’ve always wanted to make.

However, ‘The Present Is A Foreign Land’ wasn’t meant to be a revival.

Following the release of 2018’s ‘Rituals’, a record that saw the band “trying to write pop hooks and rip off Justin Bieber songs”, Deaf Havana started falling apart. Sure, it was their third Top Ten album in a row and the band played their biggest ever headline show at London’s Brixton Academy a few months after its release but “the soul just wasn’t there,” says Matty. Another year on the road “felt empty” and by the time the ‘Rituals’ tour wrapped up in November 2019, he wanted out. “Sometime in 2019, I had what I’ll call a breakdown. I spent most of that year completely sober, going to therapy and trying to sort my life out.”

Rather than offering support, his brother spent 2019 drinking heavily and taking whatever drugs he could get his hands on. “My entire life collapsed; Matty wouldn’t talk to me, everyone hated me, and for good reason,” says James. “That still wasn’t enough to stop me drinking.”

The band, still not on speaking terms, had a meeting in January 2020 and everyone decided to walk away. They booked shows to cover their remaining debts and after that, Deaf Havana would be finished. Then COVID happened. The shows were cancelled, and the band didn’t have to think about their future for a long time.

“COVID shifted everyone’s priorities,” starts Matty, who realised music was the only thing he wanted to do so started approaching it like a job, sitting down and writing every day. James tried to get sober in July, and after several failed attempts including a birthday party where he got so wasted, he scared himself, James went to his first AA meeting in April 2021. He’s been sober ever since.

As things began to open back up with COVID restrictions easing, the fractured band started to look at clearing their debts once more. “The idea was to play some shows but we figured it would be easier if there was some new music as well,” says Matty, who was sitting on the batch of songs he’d written over lockdown. He still hadn’t spoken to James in over a year but the pair, reconnecting through text messages and messages via management, went to a studio in Hastings alongside producer Mike Horner to record what would become ’19 Dreams’.

“It was meant to be our farewell song but being in the studio was such a different experience than before,” says Matty. “We didn’t put a name on it, but we got together every week and worked on new music.”

The brothers had been in the band together since 2012 but working on these new songs “was the first time we’d worked in a properly collaborative way,” explains Matty. “There was just more space for me to have a voice, which I think I needed. Working with James like that, it really was incredible.” Three weeks later, they had the album. The siblings never really spoke about it at length, but suddenly Deaf Havana had a future.

However, COVID also effected the priorities of the other two members of the band, with drummer Tom Ogden and bassist Lee Wilson finding themselves unable to return.

“’The Present Is A Foreign Land’ is the start of a completely new chapter for Deaf Havana,” says James. “I know we’ve had breaks and started again in the past but this is the most extreme version of that. This band is now Matty and I going forward together, actually focused.” Today, the brothers find it hilarious how much has changed for them over the past few years. It hasn’t been easy, but they couldn’t be happier.

Track ’19dreams’, a euphoric slab of rock ‘n’ roll, was written by Matty during that 2019 tour as he questioned his teenage dreams and the messy reality that followed while the title track captures the feeling of “not knowing where I fit in with the world,” he explains.

“That alienation, the distance I feel from everything, that’s been a theme throughout our music.” It’s why this album is being released as Deaf Havana, rather than a new band. “It was a question we asked ourselves,” starts James as Matty explains that “the songs had the heart, soul and core of what I’d always wanted Deaf Havana to be. It felt like a distilled version of the band.”

For most of the recording process, James and Matty thought this album would be the last thing they ever did as Deaf Havana. “We didn’t have any expectations,” says James so the record “naturally became an amalgamation of the last four albums.”

There’s plenty of powerful, guitar-driven anthems on the album that’ll draw comparisons to Bruce Springsteen or Sam Fender but there are also tracks like ‘Someone/Somewhere’, an ambient dance track that sees James singing lyrics “that mean more to me than anything I’ve ever written before.” Featuring additional vocals from indie-pop duo IDER on backing vocals, it’s proof that Deaf Havana still have new tricks up their sleeve.

As we’ve come to expect from Deaf Havana, ‘The Present Is A Foreign Land’ is lyrically quite bleak. “2019 was the worst year of my life,” explains James. “The worst year of your life - so far,” adds Matty, with a grin.

“But there’s more hope than there ever has been before,” says James.

“That comes from us getting through things that seem impossible, like getting sober or coming back from a breakdown” says Matty. “It’s a much more adult record because both of us have started trying to address our issues rather than just avoiding them. “ It’s also seen the pair become closer.

Matty wrote the lyrics to the thundering ‘Trying Falling’ to reassure James. “It’s about actively doing something every day to be someone better, however small it is. Real change is made through these little steps. No matter how fucking hard it is, the important thing is you're trying.” It’s a message they now both want to share.

“I do want to help other people,” says James, who is being open about his sobriety in the hope it helps others. “I do want to show people that they can get through the shit days. I hope this album creates something positive.”

It’s already done something positive for the band. “I’ve never shown anyone my music without apologising before,” continues James. “I've never been proud and I've never backed us.” That comes from how Deaf Havana first formed in 2005. ”We never had a vision. I had loads of free time, I lived in the middle of nowhere and I had three other friends who liked music, I figured I might as well play in a band for a laugh. I never expected to do anything other than play the village hall so anything on top of that was a bonus. We never really cared about being cool or trying to follow a scene. You’d be right in assuming we never took it seriously.”

But that’s changed now. “There won't be an apology before showing people this album. For the first time, I’m thinking long term,” says James. “I want Deaf Havana to be bigger than ever. I genuinely believe ‘The Present Is A Foreign Land’ is the best thing we've ever written. I hope it can connect to people and help them out of a shit situation or a low period. I hope it can help them like it’s helped us,” says James. “Things can get better.”

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