**Declan McKenna**

**Biography 2023**

Cheshunt, Hertfordshire to Los Angeles is a fair trek. A world apart. As the crow flies, the commuter town’s train station to LAX is a little under 5500 miles, and whilst Declan has long since flown the nest from his childhood in the pretty but practical suburb, his new life by the sea, found just off the East Sussex coast, remains an ocean from LA, and some. But Declan sought change. A reboot. If the demos of his new songs fizzed with the suggested scorch of a sunshine haze and bright blue skies, why not go catch some sun?

Los Angeles, it transpired, proved to be the ideal setting to capture and bottle it. Almost as soon as he landed in California earlier this year, Declan got to work with producer Gianluca Buccellati, perhaps best known for his work with Arlo Parks and Lana Del Rey. It was with Bucatelli that the sound of a new album started to come together orchestrated by the sounds swirling in Declan’s head.

If he sought more space in his recordings, he needed to loosen up and let them breathe. Where previously his biggest tunes tended to hurtle along at 100mph, economic with the notion of simply taking a quick breath, he taught and trusted himself to take his time and let the listener soak in the ambience. The result, *What Happened To The Beach?,* is an album that revels in both space and atmosphere. It evokes the sunshine Declan basked in, and it returned to the UK sounding beautifully baked.

Returning single, *Sympathy*, a song with a peace and love message, represents the effortless and uncomplicated style of writing that runs throughout the album. “It was important to use fewer words and not over-explain things this time around,” McKenna confirms. By stripping away the layers he found that his songwriting became more revealing and, ultimately, satisfying.

“Any time I tried to be too serious, the songs would get too heavy and the thing I was trying to get at, this idea of a release, was weighed down,” he adds. There is an undeniably buoyant energy across the album, from *Nothing Works’* frustrations of record label interference and criticism, to *Elevator Hum*, a call to arms of sorts if the rallying cry was for everyone to let loose. “They sound a lot like the music I listen to,” McKenna says about the new tunes, citing St Vincent (“She takes the guitar to a really cool place. Everything can be manipulated”) and Unknown Mortal Orchestra’s hypnotic and spacey energy as influences.

Naturally, an album written in response to the intensity of the last few years, both personal and globally, has moments of darkness running through it. The demons McKenna once focused his writing on as a teen, such as corrupt FIFA officials or the oppressive grip of the right-wing media, are left aside this time around. Album closer *It’s An Act* is a frank admission that getting through life can often feel like a never-ending performance. The track brings the party that precedes it to a stark ending, like the lights being switched on the dancefloor at 3 a.m. “It’s pretty dark,” McKenna says of *It’s An Act*. “It expresses the other side of all of this. Sometimes you’re just pretending and going through the motions. The past few years have been intense and it was important to get across where these songs came from.”

For this smart, sharp British singer-songwriter, the success of his previous records brought about a period of ill-health while touring America, leading a doctor to recommend therapy. It was a stride out of his comfort zone, but something McKenna soon found hugely rewarding. “It was the first time I’d been able to open up and unload,” he says. “It helped me deal with the pressures of making music and mature as a person.”

As he prepared for the release of his second album, 2020’s *Zeros*, McKenna’s imposter syndrome had already begun to kick in hard. He spoke in interviews about how the album’s numerous delays, caused by the uncertainty of the global pandemic, had given him far too much time to think and that doubts about his ability had begun to take over. The album itself maintained his preoccupation with environmental disaster and social media addiction but pushed them into dystopian sci-fi narratives. This conceptual approach was matched by a glittery smear of high-kicking glam rock.

It is easy therefore to see his forthcoming third studio album as a release, not just for himself but for the fans who have come of age in an era defined by instability and precariousness. *What Happened To The Beach?* is an album full of tone and colour, the majority of which was written with no ambition bigger than making people feel good. Musically, it’s a bit weirder and wonky, and the sound of a songwriter enjoying himself and gleefully defying expectations. “In the past few years there has been a bit of weight behind making music,” he says. “I wanted to open up and not worry about things so much. I was putting a lot of pressure on myself in the past when I just needed to drop the intensity a bit and have some fun.”

McKenna is still in his early 20s but is approaching a new era in his journey as a songwriter. He is aware that writing a more personal album, particularly one that focuses on joy over disaster, might suggest a line drawn in the sand between Declan and Declan 2.0. “I will always speak my mind with music, but we live in a time where the conversations I wanted to contribute to previously are much more out in the open now,” he says, while stressing the importance of pushing himself and not repeating ideas. “If every song features a lyrical statement then it loses some of its impact, too. I haven’t let go of that aspect of myself but I don't want to live out that style forever.”

Ultimately, McKenna feels settled in his creativity and more able to venture into new territory than ever before. “My idea of ambition has changed,” he says. “I struggle with the industry definition of that term, which tends to be playing it safe. That’s the opposite of ambition to me.” *What Happened To The Beach?* is the sound of an artist operating at the peak of his confidence, all while pushing himself in new directions. As McKenna puts it, in appropriately straightforward terms, “Opening up and embracing the simple things in life has helped me make something that is more authentically me than ever before.”

Declan’s been out on the road across the US touring, readied for a late Summer return to the UK for Reading & Leeds Festival, posited high up the line-up on the main stage. Match fit. Good to go. Ready to grab it all with both hands. And with just a cursory listen to *What Happened To The Beach?*, you wouldn’t bet against him taking it all.