Twenty-five years of Snow Patrol: where did it all go right?

Gary Lightbody has had plenty opportunity to ponder that over the last couple of years. The band’s seventh album, Wildness, their first in seven years, entered the UK charts at Number Two, went gold, and kept them on tour around the world for the best part of 18 months.

That’s a lot of gigging time, but also a lot of thinking time.

“Where did it all go right?” echoes Lighbtody. “No idea!” the singer and songwriter laughs. “After 10 years of no success, no one – least of all us – expected us these last 15 years to sell 17 million albums, headline festivals and play to thousands of people all over the world.”

Add to that: one billion global track streams, five UK platinum albums, an Ivor Novello award and Grammy and Mercury Music Prize nominations. And, in the shape of Chasing Cars, a modern classic recently anointed by the PPL as the most played song on UK radio of the 21st century.

“When we released Final Straw in 2003, I think there was general goodwill around us from the media,” continues Lightbody, “as people knew the story of the previous 10 years and were kinda glad for us to get a shot on a major label," he notes of their move from indie Jeepster (also original home of Belle and Sebastian) to discerning Polydor imprint Fiction. That “sea-change” set in motion the next phase of the band’s existence. Still, in music, as in life, nothing is a given. “Of course the good grace of the press is hard won and easy lost, but radio kept on playing us. That’s been the real key to our success, I firmly believe. Radio – and, in those days when music was still being played on music, TV – changed our lives and our fortunes.”

Now, a quarter of a century since forming at Dundee University, it’s time for Snow Patrol to reflect on those fortunes – and to do so in a typically song-centred way.

Presenting Reworked: three brand new compositions and 13 songs from the Snow Patrol catalogue – hits and live favourites – imagined anew by the band. Tracks broken down, reassembled and reanimated in hotel rooms and dressing rooms in downtime from playing the planet's arenas. *Demixes*, if you like.

The inspired results take Snow Patrol somewhere new all over again. And Lightbody credits bandmate Johnny McDaid pointing them in the right direction. Lightbody figured a bunch of acoustic rerubs was the best the band could manage with the limited time they had while on the road. But as Snow Patrol had done a Reworked tour in 2009 and were planning another one in the winter of 2019. Why not, suggested McDaid, combine the two ideas?

“So on the Wildness tour, Johnny set his recording gear up everywhere we went. He worked his butt off on this.” In fact, the singer adds, the touring inspired some of the new musical approaches.

“We just finished an acoustic tour of Australia, New Zealand and Asia. On those shows we did some of the songs close to how they sound on the Reworked album – for example, the new version of You’re All I Have came directly out of playing those acoustic shows.”

You’re All I Have is the opening track from 2006’s Eyes Open, the album that also featured Chasing Cars. On Reworked, though, 21stcentury radio’s biggest song is stripped back to first principles. Or, as Lightbody says, “it’s the song in its purest form. No big finish – stand up for the chorus! –  and no bells or whistles. Just the vital parts of the song. Not so much a reworking as a tender portrayal of its essence.”

Eyes Open is also represented by Open Your Eyes, which was the fifth single to be taken from the album. Nonetheless, the song had a remarkable afterlife in various syncs. For this album, Snow

Patrol have reclaimed it with the help of onetime full-time member and ongoing occasional writing/producing wingman Iain Archer.

“Johnny and I recorded a few things on this song and then sent them to Iain. Iain came up with the beautiful, John Martyn-style guitar, and his version floored me when I heard it the first time. Iain’s guitar playing has always been a joy to listen to and to have it feature so prominently on this album is just amazing."

Also presented in simple acoustic simplicity is Chocolate, the third single from Final Straw, and produced here in classy, “time-stopping” style by McDaid. “Chocolate has been a live favourite since we released it. It’s a song all Snow Patrol fans know – I can’t attest that they all love it but they know it!” its co-author laughs. “And we wanted to rework the songs that the fans are the most familiar with. There's not much point in reworking songs people don’t really know as there's not really a stark contrast.”

That said, “we will be doing something with the first two albums before the release of Reworked as those two albums do not feature for that same reason,” Lightbody teases.

What of the recent Twitter “accusation” that SP have “disowned” those albums, Songs for Polarbears (1998) and When It’s All Over We Still Have To Clear Up (2001), because they don’t play the songs live?

“Not true at all,” he replies with a shake of the head. “We are very proud of them. It’s just that when we play those songs live they negatively affect the atmosphere of the gig. And as Star Trek taught us: ‘The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.’”

That need to entertain and surprise also informed the approach taken to Called Out In The Dark. The curtain-raiser from 2011's Fallen Empires now comes with an inventive synth throb that echoes the original.

“I had worried a little that the whole record was getting very downtempo,” admits Lightbody. “The nature of recording in hotel rooms and dressing rooms is that things will invariably be low-key. Hard to rock out with a family of four in the next hotel room trying to sleep!

“So when it came to some of the songs we recorded towards the end of the new album, we wanted to explore a slightly higher tempo – without, of course, leaning too heavy into the original version. Called Out… is certainly the closest to the original version of any song on Reworked, but I think distinct enough to warrant its place. It has an electro bent like the original but steers clear of any of its predecessor’s tropes. I asked Iain to lift it up and he sure did.”

Then there’s the three new songs. First up, the lovely, heart-stopping Time Won’t Go Slowly.

“Johnny and I wrote this in his house in LA. We’re both massive fans of Frank Ocean, so we wanted it to sound like Frank Ocean crossed with Frank Sinatra. All the Franks! It’s a classic crooner track. We just wanted to try something starkly different from anything we have done before.

"As for the lyrics, I guess I’ve not written about love for a while and needed a fix,” he smiles. “I like the idea of the inherent tragedy woven into the fabric of time: time speeds up when we're having a great time and slows down when we're miserable. Although it’s all perception, of course, not reality. And I like that, too. That distortion. Our minds are powerful and sometimes terrible things. I guess the song tries to wrap its head around that great cosmic joke. Also it’s just a love song."

Then there’s I Think of Home, a folk-flavoured piano ballad with vivid, evocative and deeply personal lyrics. Lightbody wrote it in 2014, as part of a five-song contribution “to a night dedicated to my greatest literary hero Seamus Heaney when he opened the Seamus Heaney Home Place in Magherafelt. They wanted me to play a few songs at the opening night.

“I set my own rules for the songs’ content," he expands. "They had to be inspired by what Heaney had been inspired by: home, family, Ireland, The Troubles, hope, the soil…”

I Think of Home was later considered for inclusion on Wildness, but none of the versions the band tried out in the studio fitted.

“But then we went on tour with Wildness and at shows in Ireland and Irish strongholds like Boston, New York, Sydney and Melbourne, I would play I Think Of Home acoustically on my own in the middle of gigs. It would always go down well.

“So when it came to Reworked we had lived with the song enough to feel like we could do a great version of it. And Johnny produced a stunning version of it. I had been playing it a certain way for so long it was hard for me to hear it any other way. That can be dangerous – stagnation can set in. So when that happens you have to let someone you trust take it from you and remake it. So, in the spirit of what we were doing, it was great to get a reworked version of a song that had never even been released."

The third new song is Made Of Something Different Now, which is quietly sweeping, quietly epic and wholly devastating.

“One of my favourite tracks we have done in ages," nods Lightbody. "In keeping with the Reworked attitude of trying new things, it’s unlike much of what we’ve done before. Lyrically, it’s the story of a dear friend’s heartbreak. My own heart, having not been in a relationship in ten years, is unrisked so unbroken. A damning self-portrait if ever there was one! Writing this song – with Johnny – made me realise my own lack of bravery in that department. Hasn’t effected any change yet, mind you, but it did start me thinking at least… Anyway, as us Celts say, it’s a belter,” he grins.

The final word should go to Take Back The City. Gary Lightbody’s hymn to Belfast is the song that opens Reworked and is sure to be an emotive live highlight when Snow Patrol take Reworked on the road later this year. As he reflects on 25 years of Snow Patrol, how have his feelings about the city changed in the 11 years since the song was released?

“Well, as the song says, I love Belfast tonight and always. There are still things that drive me crazy about the place. But I think that's the same for everyone’s home city – although my home town, of course, is Bangor.

“My love has deepened though not waned. I see the conflict that still goes on in people’s hearts, my own included, and yet there is this drive in most people – *most*people – to put the past behind us and move on. To lift each other up.

“We need that now more than ever with the looming clusterfuck that is Brexit and the devastation it has the potential to bring to the whole of UK, but to Northern Ireland more than anywhere else. We need that will to put the past behind us and lift each other.”

Hear, hear. Equally, with these 16 inspiring, enveloping tracks, this is also moment to embrace the past – and, like the man said, to use it to lift each other. This is Reworked. This is Snow Patrol’s history, and their legacy. And it’s their inspired next step.

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