

PLUSH

Fed BROKEN HORSE



Finally, a full release for pop visionary's rich opus. *By Jon Dale*



As the recent appearance of Brian Wilson's *Smile* and his brother Dennis' *Bambu* shows, music fans love their long lost masterpieces. The theory loosely goes that, through the artist's scaling of emotional heights and/or plumbing of psychological depths, these records access some kind of private anxiety or pain that's somehow more honest: it's all the better if you can hear this manifesting directly through the songs and their performances. Vicarious living? We love it.

It's tempting to reach the same conclusions about *Fed*, the second album by Chicago-based songwriter Liam Hayes, aka Plush. After all, halfway into opener "Whose Blues", he sings, almost dispassionately, "my creation has drowned me". Hayes must have been in a tough spot when he started working on the album. How exactly to follow up his debut single, 1994's "Found A Little Baby", which was received (particularly by the British music press) as though he was the second coming of Burt Bacharach?

Fed's story hovers somewhere between folly and heartbreak. One of its songs appeared in embryonic form as Plush's second single, 1997's "No Education", but the subsequent debut album, 1998's *More You Become You*, flew in from leftfield, a brief set of dolorous piano ballads that recalled Laura Nyro, or Paul McCartney's "Waterfalls". Returning to work on *Fed*, rumours started circulating about the album's escalating costs. Hayes' label Drag City walked away from the project, after running out of money. Hayes borrowed from family and friends; engineer Steve Albini extended him credit; long-serving

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band members came and went.

In 2002, when *Fed* was finally finished – or, more correctly, abandoned – its cost was so prohibitive, it only saw release in Japan. If you wanted to hear the album outside of that country, you had to pay equally prohibitive import costs – my copy set

me back a good 60 dollars. That says plenty about the kind of dedication that Hayes engenders in his fans, though at the time, the very idea that there could be another Plush album in the racks seemed almost like a cruel joke played on his devoted following.

All of this makes *Fed's* reappearance six years after its initial release, and four years after the album's early demos surfaced as *Underfed* – a very good thing indeed. From "Whose Blues"'s opening salvo, all blasts of epiphanic brass and descending swirls of strings, you can hear why Hayes spent so much time and money on the record. Orchestrated by R&B arranger Tom Tom MMLXXXIV (who has worked with Earth Wind & Fire and Loleatta Holloway), *Fed* is beautifully excessive, ornamented with dazzling soul/pop arrangements. And the songs are glorious – the first half of the album leaps from the piano pop of "Blown Away", through "Greyhound Bus

Station" ('60s beat meets side one of Love's *Da Capo*), into the strung-out, narcotic blues of "No Education".

But *Fed's* dark heart is a sequence of progressively bleaker songs toward the end of the record, where the tone shifts noticeably, and everything moves into deeper waters. From "Whose Blues Anyway", through the questioning, desolate "What'll We Do" ("You ought to try hard to stay my friend/When it's gone all wrong... How can I go on living this way?"), and the quiet desperation of "Having It All", *Fed* reaches similar one-man-against-the-world emotional states as

Robin Gibb's *Robin's Reign*, or Dennis Wilson's *Pacific Ocean Blue*.

It can be easy to find yourself caught up in the story of *Fed*: its intrigues, delays, and economics. But that does great disservice both to its exhausting emotional trajectory, and to the depth and warmth of Hayes' songwriting. The album's redemptive tenor is summed up beautifully by the album's pinnacle, the title track, where Hayes sings "may I sleep in dirty water, all my sbines", pausing for a brief moment before gulping "I believe, I believe... believe..." Now's your turn.

Q A Liam Hayes

I get the impression *Fed* had quite a complicated gestation period...

The only thing complicated about making the record was that we were doing it in a drought-stricken landscape. At that time, nothing was happening in music that I could get into. *Fed* was an attempt to grow an orange grove in a musical desert.

How do you feel about the record, listening back to it? I loved making it and I love everyone who was involved in the process of bringing it

to life. For me, it's as much a place as it is a recording. The only thing I'd change is the battery in my watch. **What led you to work with figures like Tom Tom MMLXXXIV and Morris Jennings?** They're fully accomplished writers and performers – lifelong musicians. I identified with that. Once I'd discovered them, I felt I'd connected with the real 'Chicago Scene'. **Can you tell us about your upcoming album, *Bright Penny*?**



There are an amazing more musicians who were on *Fed* – Tom Tom's back and Morris had been dug deep into the mine of great talent. I'll be there any time. What's next? Songs that perform. Songs that perform for everyone. Music matters.