

Hotel Lux 'Hands Across The Creek' bio.

Once contenders for the mantle of Britain's most self-conscious band — guilty, by their own admission, of pandering to audiences' tastes following their move from Pompey to London — Hotel Lux have crafted a bold and bright identity that is truly their own on their brilliant debut album 'Hands Across The Creek'. All it took was for their wildest dreams to be dashed.

"We always cared too much about how we were going to be perceived," bass player Cam Sims recalls of those early days, as Hotel Lux became entwined in South London music scene folklore. It seems silly, now: the band's early, clattering pub-rock singles received widespread acclaim from the offset — their acute social commentary and raw passion greater assets, perhaps, than they gave themselves credit for. But a sense of vulnerability endured all the while, says Cam, especially as the careers of Brixton Windmill contemporaries like Sorry and Shame began to ignite: "there was always that little voice in your head," he says.

Anxieties aside, Hotel Lux — completed by acerbic lead vocalist Lewis Duffin, guitarist Sam Coburn, drummer Craig MacVicar, and new members Max Oliver (guitar) and Dillon Home (organ; violin) — found themselves on the path to major success in 2020 around the release of the Barstool Preaching EP. Iggy Pop was singing their praises on the radio, and the band themselves were preparing for their big break in America via SXSW Festival. Then, the world shut down and their Stateside debut was cancelled. "We were gutted," Lewis remembers. "Everything had been pretty exciting for us up until that point."

Hotel Lux were left stumped, says Cam: "it was the most fragile we've been". Original guitarist Jake Sewell even jumped ship, leaving the band to move to Amsterdam. But the surviving members remained focused — opting to put the meagre funds that remained from their America budget towards creating an album of their own. But first, they had to write some songs.

"It took a long, long time," Lewis says of the writing process for what would eventually be their debut. Making songs about wearing gloves and going to Sainsbury's at 6am was hardly proving worthwhile, and there were "a lot of arguments" as the band struggled to settle on a sound to call their own. "Craig and Sam got really hooked on ESG," Lewis explains — referring to the '80s New York post-punk band known for their funky rhythms and simplistic refrains. "I hated that. It was doing my head in."

But with new guitarist Max (of fellow South London band LEGSS) bringing a "scratchy and harsher, more tone-y Telecaster sound" with him in 2020, the roots of Hotel Lux's transformation were soon in place. The band's classic influences — Dr Feelgood, The Stranglers and Ian Dury — would mesh with the sounds of artists like Neil Young, Brian Eno and The Waterboys as Hotel Lux spread their wings while remaining faithful to their roots. (It's a truth reflected in the album title — a phrase Lewis picked up from his Dad's mates, which he believed to refer to the Portsmouth-Fareham connection.) "We ended up doing the whole 'haha, that's what the fourth album will sound like' thing — but ended up actually doing it on the first album", says Cam.

The band decamped to The Wirral, near Liverpool, where they found further inspiration in the marina, the local Morrisons and a producer and kindred spirit in Bill Ryder-Jones (*The Coral*; *Arctic Monkeys*; *Yard Act*) — who also contributed piano to the record. It was here that the band's multi-faceted influences, £20 Casio keyboards and experimentation with omnichords, violins and marauding song structures finally fell into place. With rich emotional peaks matching the band's signature self-effacing wit, and as many jangling guitars as there are squiggling organ hooks, the results have proven emphatic.

Lead single 'Common Sense' was influenced by '80s pop-rock group the Beautiful South, says Lewis. It was "a reaction against what was expected of us" that likewise recycles familiar themes of apathy and media criticism — previously touched upon in 'Tabloid Newspaper'. Inspired by the RMT strikes and trade union leader Mick Lynch, as well as the media's treatment of Jeremy Corbyn, it's an intricate and rhythmic anthem full of funk bass, machine gun snares and clattering guitars reminiscent of *Television* or Glasgow indie icons *Orange Juice*. It's undoubtedly the band's most euphoric and danceable single to date.

Lewis' trademark wit and social commentary, meanwhile, sets a high mark in the album's opening track 'Old Timer', which sarcastically name-checks the "*nine-to-five grind*", "*champagne socialists*" and his ability to "*rip off The Fall*" between chiming guitars, chugging bass and elevator-music-organs. The key lyric is sing-a-long gold: "*I only saw my Dad cry once and that was at the football, I think that says an awful lot about masculinity*," — a reference to the 2008 FA Cup Final that Lewis attended with his skinhead father and "a bunch of bald, macho Stone Island men" as a ten-year-old.

Football is a recurring theme: the album was recorded during England's legendary run to the final of the Euros in 2021 — and the team's 2-0 defeat of Germany in July 2021 proved a galvanising moment in the album's recording. As a result, the track 'National Team' — in which Cam's sardonic lyrics hark back to the wit of Art Brut's Eddie Argos, while trebly guitars bumble and bounce like a disorientated bar patron caught up in Match of the Day highlights — sounds like it's set to be the indie world's alternative World Cup anthem this winter. Arguably the album's most impressive moments, though, are born out of a rejection of "the whole laddy beer thing" that the band previously leant into.

"We wanted to show that we do have tender moments," says Lewis, "and that we're not just out on the piss drinking Stella all the time." As a result, a brave and dynamic trilogy of highlights in 'Morning After Mourning', 'Eazy Being Lazy' and 'An Ideal For Living' are cited as three of his favourite tracks the band have ever done.

The latter is a soaring and deeply melodic number built around a tombola-esque piano melody ("it's almost like a medieval riff — something that you'd hear at an old tavern", Lewis says) that evolves through emotive key changes and harmonic strings as the refrain "*I'm just getting used to being wrong*" is sung proudly. 'Morning After Mourning' and 'Eazy Being Lazy', meanwhile, are both sung by Sam — whose sombre, *Television Personalities*-style vocal quivers over a drum machine beat to offer another complimentary spin, with the latter eventually reaching a crescendo of brassy sounds and buzzing riffs.

There are great stories to be found elsewhere: 'Eastbound and Down' — which headlines fat salaries, cryptocurrencies, three-piece suits and Windsor knots — was born from Lewis' experiences living in Beckton. The town, just up the river Thames from London's business centre, Canary Wharf, is a stone's throw from the industrial wastelands around Beckton Gas Works, once used as a stand-in for Vietnam in Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*. "It was terrible," Lewis says. "I had no mates there, and I just remember seeing all the Canary Wharf types in their dodgy haircuts and dodgy suits every day, and just always being quite jealous, thinking maybe I should have done that."

And 'Strut' — a hilarious take-down of the types of people the band would bump into at 4am house parties — takes aim at posers with a "*David Lynch poster clung to the wall*" and "*a subscription to a craft beer zine*." It was almost left off the album for fear that it would alienate the band's own mates. Closer 'Solidarity Song', meanwhile, is a ramshackle anthem that finishes the record with a bang — with pinwheel organs, pub pianos and buoyant jangles harking back to '80s indie icons like *Felt* and *The The* while Lewis rants enthusiastically about being chatted "*into a coma*" by an "*oxygen thief*" spouting Dorian Grey. It's one of several tracks elevated by the presence of a violin player, who was called into the studio for a day just before the band wrapped up work.

Ultimately, the ambitious and unrestrained songwriting shines above everything on this outstanding debut (and this is coming from a band whose frontman once claimed he “didn’t think choruses were cool”). And with the recording complete, Hotel Lux has already found some vindication: they were invited back to SXSW this year, where strawpedding White Claw cans and attending parties that were “like a shit version of American Pie” was welcomed with open arms. They unexpectedly befriended Dua Lipa. And they even performed at Dulwich Hamlet FC, raising funds for those struggling as a result of the Ukraine conflict.

Now, with ‘Hands Across The Creek’ set for release in early 2023, Hotel Lux look set to become something their early critics might have not foreseen: a band full of confidence, with the ability to transcend their peers and carve out their own corner of the British music tapestry to confirm a legacy that is their own. “It feels really important,” Lewis concludes of the whole ordeal. “We spent a lot of time worrying.”