

Album Review: The Civil Wars

Amidst the melancholia of a partnership gone amiss comes forth a gritty masterpiece, says [Katrina Northern](#)

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Earlier this year, fans were stunned when seemingly out of nowhere folk duo The Civil Wars essentially filed for musical divorce, citing 'internal discord and irreconcilable differences of ambition' (they have never been romantically involved and are both married with families). Their tour was called off and silence fell.

Until now.

Their self-titled album, recorded before the split, has just been released to much acclaim. Joy Williams has broken her silence, revealing she and band-mate John Paul White have not spoken in eight months. She has done the bulk of the publicity for the album but there will not be a tour for the foreseeable future.

If The Civil Wars turns out to be their final album together then they have certainly made it count. It is a captivating, brooding and edgy folk masterpiece which even surpasses their exceptional debut album, Barton Hollow. There are more instrumental layers in many of the songs as well as some gritty distortion, evoking the intense, smouldering atmosphere which Joy has spoken of. The album cover, an image of billowing plumes of smoke, as well as videos thus far have been shot in brooding black and white.

But the apparently gloomy aesthetic does not represent every song. 'From This Valley' is an exception to the generally Southern Gothic tone of the album and showcases Joy and John Paul's individual ranges and vocal harmonies to perfection. In the final third of the song the guitar is muted as they seem to play each other's vocals like instruments. It is a song full of faith and optimism, with a pleasant June Carter-esque country tone.

'Dust to Dust' is gentler, whispered like a soft breeze, designed to be a representation of the experience of loneliness. To many a listener the lyrics will seep symbolism reminiscent of the dynamic of the pair: 'you're like a mirror, reflecting me / takes one to know one, so take it from me'. In the final lines the pronoun changes, a shift to the universal which also implies the struggles of being on the road and away from family: 'you've been lonely, too long... /...we've been lonely, too long'. At times you do feel as if you are eavesdropping on something intensely personal and 'Eavesdrop' is another song that excels in its final stages, swelling to an unusually anthemic climax.

'Same Old, Same Old' and 'The One That Got Away' are full of that yearning, aching pain while 'Sacred Heart', sung entirely in French, is perhaps the surprise of the album with its unexpected charm. The final lines translate as 'perhaps you cannot forgive me / the shadows grow' and 'will you come for me? / I'll wait for you there / only you', offering perhaps the vaguest hint of a reconciliatory olive branch.

It is very rare to find a band that can create such a tremendous stage presence with the subtlest inflections of their vocals. These are two characters who appeared so different yet so complementary – the bubbly, beaming Joy and the sombre, introverted John Paul. Whatever tensions the band went through prior to their split, the music and the chemistry in this album has not suffered. Now fans can only put faith in any healing possibilities music may hold for The Civil Wars and know that their work thus far will certainly endure.



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