

**LIARS - *WIXIW***

“Teach me how to be a person,” Liars frontman Angus Andrew intones over a rattling synth groove on “Flood To Flood,” a song off of ***WIXIW***, the upcoming new album from Liars, to be released worldwide on (date TK) by Mute. It’s a crucial lyric, providing insight into the fractured conundrum that evocatively haunts every note of *WIXIW* – one of the most provocative, unsettling, and significant records you’ll probably encounter in 2012.

Recorded in L.A. and self-produced by the band (with additional production from Daniel Miller and mixing by Tom Biller), *WIXIW* is hard to shake, tough to pin down, and impossible to get out of one’s head after even an initial listen. Simultaneously the most accessible, and most challenging, release from these art / indie/ noise/ experimental/ whatever iconoclasts, it’s unlike anything in Liars’ repetoire – which is pretty much business as usual at this stage in their career. *WIXIW* is actually Liars’ sixth full-length album as a band, which comprises Andrew, Aaron Hemphill, and Julian Gross. As such, it provides both a summation of Liars’ work up to now, and a complete break from anything you’d ever heard the band do previously. “If we aren’t confusing ourselves with what we do, then we’ve failed,” Andrew notes. “By that standard, *WIXIW* is a success.”

Forming in the Los Angeles area, where co-founders Andrew and Hemphill met at the famed California Institute of the Arts, Liars soon after decamped to Brooklyn, gaining notice after being lumped into the early aughts’ post-punk revival with their first album *They Threw Us in a Trench and Stuck a Monument On Top* (2001). Liars then willfully confounded that pigeonholing with classically difficult sophomore effort *They Were Wrong, So We Drowned*, a confrontational, noisy concept cycle dealing with German witch trials co-produced by the band with David Sitek (TV on the Radio, Yeah Yeah Yeahs). Liars then decamped to Berlin to create 2006’s *Drum’s Not Dead*: another conceptual album about the poisonous power dynamic between two fictional protagonists Drum and Mount Heart Attack, it proved as acclaimed for its shapeshifting surrealism and brutal rhythms as *They Were Wrong…* was initially reviled, reaching #6 on *Pitchfork*’s Top 50 Albums of that year. Perversely, the band’s eponymous 2007 follow-up, mixed by Depeche Mode collaborator Gareth Jones, replaced the now-trademark heady themes with a gripping emphasis on stripped-down, primal rock and roll; *Rolling Stone* listed “Freak Out” from the album one of the 100 Best Songs of that year. Such admiration didn’t prepare for Liars’ next release, 2009’s *Sisterworld* – and the band’s masterpiece up to then, receiving an 8.1 “Best New Music” rating from Pitchfork.

Relocating back to L.A., Liars holed up in a seedy, violent neighborhood above a marijuana dispensary to create *Sisterworld*’s nuanced yet forbidding song cycle. Co-produced by the band with Tom Biller (Kanye West, Jon Brion, Beck), *Sisterworld* explored in depth how we create alternate dimensions inside ourselves to cope with the horror of everyday life. *WIXIW* builds on those themes, but in more oblique, pointed fashion. According to Andrew, where *Sisterworld* was about reacting to the outside world, *WIXIW* proves more personal, directed more towards an inner psychological dystopia in the wake of crumbling interpersonal relationships and illness, emotional and otherwise, that band members found themselves surrounded by. “I had just begun a relationship, and Aaron had just ended one,” Andrew says. “We kind of found ourselves in the same place, just on different sides of the coin, obsessing over the same thoughts. We had to figure out who we were, and what our relationship was as a band, and that bled into the music we started to create.”

*WIXIW*’s title comes from the woozily tribal, confessional title track, which Hemphill had hastily titled with an abstract palindrome to stand in for the words “wish you” that recur throughout. “I wish you were here with me,” Andrew pleads in what might be considered the song’s chorus, before contradicting himself a couple lines later: “I wish you would not come back to me.” “When I saw those letters together, I knew that it was not just the album’s title, but the theme underpinning everything we’d been writing,” Andrew says. “Whenever you say ‘I wish’ about anything, you’re denying the reality of the situation you’re in,” adds Hemphill. “The more you try to wish and fantasize something into existence, the more you fall into a self-destructive state. It’s alluring, but impossible to get out when you’ve gone too far.”

The reflexive title reflects the album’s preoccupations, which prove not just lyrical, but musical. The songs lure you in with beckoning grooves and appealing atmospheres, circling hypnotically but leading nowhere, sucking the listener in fully before exposing their cancerous DNA. *WIXIW* opens with “The Exact Colour Of Doubt,” which is one of the most stereotypically beautiful songs in Liars’ discography. It’s a slow-motion ballad floating on gorgeously undulating synth strings and echoing guitar lines, over which Andrew reveals a beguiling croon like never before; the seductive surfaces, however, only grotesque the underlying obsession and regret in the words. Similarly, “No. 1 Against The Rush” uses hooky melodies and a perky beat – “We joke that it’s like our version of ‘Steppin’ Out’ by Joe Jackson,” cracks Hemphill – to subversively sugarcoat the aftermath of a relationship spiraling out again and again. “Ill Valley Prodigies,” meanwhile, combines nostalgia-poisoned found sounds with Andrew’s elegant but unsettling falsetto contrasted against a delicate acoustic guitar. Another unexpected move is the syncopated 4/4 thump of “Brats”: it’s the closest a Liars track has ever come to “real” club music – that is, until Andrew’s distorted, unhinged vocal empties the dancefloor. “Coming off the last tour, all I listened to was dance music,” Andrew explains. “It made sense that that was going to be the direction for this album – and then I realized what a terrible idea that was, especially considering how huge all that’s become. Instead, we took that influence and twisted it until it didn’t resemble anything that one would expect from typical dance music or ‘electronica.’”

Some tracks, however, dovetail with *au courant* sounds. The ominous sub-bass and skittering, off-kilter beats of “Octagon” and “Ill Valley Prodigies” which echoes the current fascination with rough-hewn ‘90s sampladelica; Andrew claims that wasn’t conscious. “Liars just needed a new template,” he notes. “We didn’t want to sound like anything we’d ever done before.” As such, *WIXIW* represents Liars’ first embrace of “in-the-box” computer music-making software. While longtime Liars collaborator Biller ultimately did mix the album with the band, according to Andrew, “We didn’t want to filter our ideas through an outside engineer or producer while we were creating.”

To that end, Andrew and Hemphill took a couple of laptops to a house in a remote area of L.A. called Frasier Park, living and working together in tandem. “The process had to match the dynamic in the songs,” Andrew explains. “Before, we’d always write our own stuff separately before bringing it to the band. With this, Aaron and I had to face each other every day, and agree on every word, every note. It was tense, but worth it.” Hemphill largely eschewed amps and electric guitars, preferring unpredictable analog keyboards like the Doepfer Dark Energy or homemade, user-generated synths accessed online via Native Instruments’ Reaktor program. As well, for percussion sounds, Gross skipped a typical drum kit, triggering beats into amps, pedals, and unlikely software to give them an unlikely sheen. “Synthetic sounds and contemporary electronic textures just fit the kind of vibe the new stuff had,” Hemphill says. “There’s a sonic claustrophobia to music made strictly on computers that fit our intent.” The band also sought out the production guidance of Mute founder Daniel Miller. “Daniel’s history with electronic music is insane, from all the Mute artists to his own work as a producer and artist as The Normal,” Andrew says. “Attempting an album like this, we would’ve been idiots to not take advantage of that knowledge.” “Daniel was a force in the studio,” Hemphill adds. “We would be like ‘Okay, we’re done for the night,’ but he would always want to keep going! His attention to details and sounds, and how to create them with machines and programs, was really crucial.”

Liars’ embrace of new technology, however, makes sense considering they’ve always been more of an interdisciplinary multi-media assault than just a mere rock band. Liars’ music, for example, can’t be separated from the visuals that typically accompany each album. *Drum’s Not Dead* came packaged with a DVD featuring three different short films for each track; *Sisterworld* was announced online with a series of evocative clips created by each member of the band; following tradition, *WIXIW* has been preceded by a series of odd audio and visual fragments presented via Liars’ Tumblr, <http://amateurgore.tumblr.com/.> It’s a polarizing but effective process, all about eluding expectations and sabotaging casual interpretation – a consistent approach that continues to produce works like *WIXIW* that defy easy pathology. “We never can just settle on formula – that would make me insane,” Andrew says. “We have to take risks and just fuck things up anew every time. It’s ingrained.”

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