

ROGUE STATES



(David Wright, Michael Clarke, Steve Clarke, Stuart Baxter Wilkinson)

Biography

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Some bands aspire to greatness; chasing big sounds and big ideas in an attempt to resonate. For others, it just happens to them. And so it is for Birmingham four piece Rogue States. The big ideas they wrestle with lyrically, like the widescreen, stadium guitars which back them, are there because the instant pop songs they set out to write got hijacked by questions and circumstance. The soaring melodies and driving anthems, like the obvious U2/ Coldplay/Snow Patrol comparisons, are there because that's just what happens when feeling and towering choruses meet.

"I don't even think the songs are that deep," smiles singer/guitarist Michael Clarke. "I think they're actually quite simple. But maybe that's what works best with our sound because it throws it all open. The songs and lyrics I relate to best aren't the ones that *tell* me how it is, but let me explore how it is. That's what we're doing, exploring."

By their own admission it's taken a more than average amount of exploring to arrive at the majestic intimacy that defines their debut EP.

Steve Clarke (bass) and Stuart Baxter-Wilkinson (drums) first paired-up with Steve's singer-songwriter brother Michael following the demise of their successful punk-pop band Dum Dums. In 2003, going by the name Clarkesville, Michael released the critically acclaimed album *The Half Chapter*, with Steve and Stuart joining his live band. After extensive touring, they started writing material for what would have been the second album only to find that writing together, as a band, was taking them in a whole new musical direction. It would be another four years before that new direction properly morphed into Rogue States with the addition of guitarist David Wright. In the meantime, to pay the bills, Steve and Stuart earned a living the hard way, putting in two and a half years on the road teching for Razorlight.

"I think I speak for both of us when I say it was an invaluable experience," offers Steve wryly. "Being on the other side of the fence, seeing what goes into making the touring machine work... we were always appreciative of our crew before, but I don't think you ever quite realise how much effort they put in. Still, we'll be an absolute nightmare to tech for this time around. [shakes his head and sucks air over teeth] 'You don't wanna do it like that.'"

Inevitably, years of near constant touring resulted in close friendships with Razorlight, particularly with then drummer Andy Burrows, who on nights off would come and see Rogue States play and in a bizarre role reversal, would help Stuart set-up his drums. In March 2009 the band supported Razorlight on their UK tour and then Andy literally put his money where his mouth is and paid for the recording of the band's debut EP.

And it was money well spent. The EP is a quietly monumental collection of extremes: tenderly intimate and shudderingly epic, a calming respite and rousing call to arms, the lonely ache of doubt and the surging joy of a crowd pleasing anthem. From the lightness of *Surrender's* questioning to the reinvigorating groundswell of *Lights*; from *Faultline's* powerful whisper to *Kings Of The Ghost Town Mile's* rallying cry, the EP's songs bear the scars of experience and all the disillusionment and indefatigable optimism of a band who've travelled a long way to find themselves.

"The thing is, I know less now where I'm coming from than I ever have," says Michael. "I know less about everything and it's opened everything up. All I know now is anything is possible.

"I feel freer to talk about things that I didn't feel comfortable writing about before. A lot of it's to do with issues of faith; questioning faith, loss of faith, trying to hang-on to faith."

Steve: "It's an aging thing as well. I think it's easy to have a lot of conclusions as a young man, but that's just because you've not lived enough life to come up with the questions. I don't think it's odd that you have more questions than answers the older you get."

Michael: "Not that all our songs are about faith. The idea of wrestling with

whatever it is you've come to believe in, whether that's god or people or life or music or the things we do, that's always in the background. But I think our songs are rarely about specifics. They're more about exploring ideas than finding answers."

Expansive questions call for expansive backdrops, and while Rogue States have no shortage of them, for the most part they too were inspired more by circumstance than intention. Or at least by the recruitment of guitarist David Wright.

Steve: "We'd had a few guitarists before Dave, but he's the first who really brought something to the band. And what he brought was a Roland Space Echo. The mother of all analogue delay effects." Dave: "That basically plays for me." Steve: "Having Dave, and his Echo, has made this band what it was always meant to be. We didn't set out to have a huge sound, but now we've got it, it really works. The main thing though is great songwriting. That's what it always comes back to."

"I've always loved efficient songs," says Michael, "and writing them is a great discipline to learn. I grew up listening to The Police and Elvis Costello, and no one can cram content into a song like those two. Writing proper, efficient songs is an art and there are very few people who can do it. We try our best."

A band shaped by experience, classic pop and restless minds, Rogue States arrive uniquely accomplished; a breakthrough act with a debut EP fit to rival any "third album classic" you care to mention. Yet as much as their debut is the culmination of everything that's been, as Michael insists, they're still very much at the beginning. "We don't know where it will go yet. We're just completely open to being adventurous and exploring and seeing what happens. As long as we're writing great songs, that's all that matters."

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