

M E T R I C

Formentera



photo credit: Justin Broadbent

The vinyl artwork for Metric’s new album, *Formentera*, includes a motto that sums up the past few years: “This Is What Happened.” It’s an understatement that manages to say everything. This is what happened: pandemic, politics, social unrest, war. This is what happened: a band at the peak of its

creative power deciphering the turbulence surrounding us, and blazing a way through it. This is what happened: nine new songs that capture everything essential about Metric —modular synthesis, muscular guitars, locked-in rhythm and shimmering vocals from Emily Haines.

Even real places become imaginary when they are

so far out of reach. Named for an idyllic island near Ibiza off the coast of Spain, *Formentera* is a place that, for Metric, only existed on a page in a “dream destinations” travel book that lay open on a desk in the new recording studio that guitarist Jimmy Shaw built in 2020, in a rural hamlet north of Toronto. This is the setting where the band’s

eighth album took shape. Shaw brought on *Synthetica* collaborator Liam O'Neil as well as longtime friend Gus van Go (The Stills) to co-engineer and co-produce with him. When the border opened, Metric bassist Joshua Winstead and drummer Joules Scott Key came in from the U.S to record, adding live energy and sonic depth to complete the Metric sound.

The result is a conceptual arc that progresses from tension and turmoil to dance-floor abandon, beginning with the edgy ten-minute album opener "Doomscroller," and progressing through a color wheel of emotions, from determined perseverance on "What Feels Like Eternity" to self-emancipation in full orchestral bloom on the title track as Haines poses the question, "Why not just let go?" There's a sense of resolution in the very matter-of-fact, deceptively catchy "False Dichotomy," and the album ends on a melancholy high with "Paths in the Sky," a love song to lifelong friendship, a thematic companion track to "All Comes Crashing," an end-of-days banger and the first single.

"This is what we're all thinking about," Haines says. "So let's address it, let's have this whole expansive emotional experience that can feel collective instead of all going through it alone."

What's the connection between the album title and the Mediterranean island?

Shaw: By January 2021, we had been living in our imaginations for a long time, because we couldn't physically go anywhere else. When you listen to the album from beginning to end, you start with this immediate feeling of tension building, of being stuck in a loop, and then there's this intense release that happens when the orchestra comes in and you're sort of swept off your feet into the song "Formentera" and it's like you escaped. As the rest of the songs came together around it, that song started to feel like the identity of the album, the throughline.

Haines: We came to this realization that it wasn't even about an actual place anymore, it was about creating an escape for yourself in your mind because you're powerless over so many things.

This album is topical without being specific, almost like you're describing a future that has suddenly arrived.

Haines: Let's talk about "Doomscroller" for a minute. The preliminary lyric, "Lining up all the numbers under the names," that's something I could have written anytime, and it could be about any number of horrific fucking realities. It could be a tally of victims of domestic violence, of displaced people seeking

safety, of species of animals that have gone extinct. I think the George Floyd killing had just happened when I wrote it, but the sense I've had as we've lived with this song for the past two years has been that it went from sounding really dark to feeling like reality has darkened to match what I'm describing in that song. You do get redemption at the end, though. I feel like the dynamics of that song mirror the dynamics that play out across the whole album, like an abbreviated version. Is it even possible to call a 10-minute song an abbreviation of anything?

Metric's music has always had a socio-political element. Is that something your fans expect?

Shaw: Everyone has artists in their lives that fulfill certain roles. Emily is like a lightning rod. One of the roles that she fulfills in people's lives is that she helps interpret what's happening in the world. She does the same thing for me. When she calls me up and says, "I have a new song, meet me at the studio," I get excited because I feel like I get to have a new interpretation of what's going on.

Haines: I want our function for people to be like, "Metric is putting out a record! I need to hear it because it's going to be useful for me, they're going to address the things that are happening that are freaking me out, they're going to make me feel like I'm not going crazy,

they're going to make me dance my ass off and help me find my way."

How much has that role changed over the years?

Haines: Lyrically, that's always been my direction, so I don't feel like it's something new. What might be new is the general awareness that something bigger is going on. In interviews lately I don't feel like I'm radically political if I touch on something of substance in the conversation, which used to happen before.

What did Liam O'Neil bring to the process?

Shaw: He's been a deep musical partner, brain, brother, friend for a long time. We invited him to come up in June 2020 for what we thought would be eight weeks, and then we realized it would be more like eight months. Or maybe eight years. But a year or two year before that moment, Liam and I had started an electronic project. We're huge fans of Boards of Canada and The Field and Jon Hopkins, and we made a whole record of minimal electronic stuff that was just sitting on a hard drive somewhere. At the beginning of the writing process for this album, we had been working mostly on songs Emily brought in, and then one day in the studio we opened up all those folders of music that Liam and I had come up with and played a bunch of it for

Emily and she loved it and was inspired to write to it.

Haines: The process of writing on those tracks was really fun. I knew I'd only get one chance for that first reaction to anything they played, so we had the mic on so I could record whatever came to me in the moment the very first time I heard it. Song titles, melodies, lyrics — a lot of it came really fast on those first listens. It happened really fluidly and spontaneously. Like with "Paths in the Sky," I remember singing that melody and having the title and seeing the whole thing in a flash.

It's been a while since you've recorded anywhere but Toronto or New York or LA. How did being in a new space in a rural setting shape Formentera?

Shaw: It was more about being free of the shackles of what we had thought were the necessary tools. We started writing this album at Emily's house, and we had probably five percent of the gear and the equipment and the instruments that we usually have when we start that process, but we discovered quickly that we didn't need it.

What happened when you moved into the new studio?

Haines: For me this was one of the happiest processes of making an album ever,

because instead of the usual thing happening where you hire a producer and there's this very conventional top-down approach to working and decision making, instead I got to work with this excellent trio of Jimmy, Liam and Gus, who are all musicians and engineers and producers, and they would trade off roles in this very natural way without any of the boring ego bullshit. Plus, I recorded all my vocals in the control room instead of in the fish-bowl vocal booth, which I always struggled with in the past but it never occurred to me before that it could be any different. I thought I just had to suffer through it.

Shaw: It ended up being a surreal experience where everyone was in the same room, because the studio is in a converted church and we never built any walls. Everything is in a big, wide open room, including the kitchen. Between the four of us, Liam and Gus and Emily and I could take care of everything that was necessary and it could all be happening at the same time, recording and editing and conceptualizing and cooking delicious food to share with a bottle of wine when we finished work for the day. And then when we finally got Josh and Joules into the country and they became part of it, it was like we totally lifted off. It was a unique recording experience, completely unlike anything I've ever experienced before. ●

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