

Out Of The Background, Into The Foreground

KEANE frontman Tom Chaplin steps out of the shadow of addiction on debut album.

WORDS: MART MCDONALD PHOTOGRAPHY: DEREK HUDSON / ISLAND RECORDS

When Keane announced that they would be taking a break following the release of their *Best Of* in 2013, to those who have followed the band's career it won't have come as a total surprise. Since signing to Island Records ten years earlier after a number of years without success, the three childhood friends from East Sussex suddenly became a global phenomenon following 2004's debut album *Hopes And Fears*. Like many before them, they soon discovered that the success they had been craving when back in their bedrooms in Battle was a double-edged sword. The relentless album-tour cycle, the inevitable critical backlash and the continuous desire to push themselves musically all took their toll on their friendships and relationships - something was bound to give.

So, whilst piano player and songwriter Tim Rice-Oxley (widely acknowledged as the driving force behind the band) would have been ready to jump straight into the preparatory stages of a new Keane album to follow 2012's *Strangeland* (which in retrospect provides a heart-breaking insight into the breakdown of his own marriage), his bandmates may have been more keen to pause and take stock. Whilst drummer Richard Hughes and bassist Jesse Quin wanted to concentrate on family and outside interests (Hughes is a keen amateur cyclist and human rights activist, while Quin has established a growing creative arts hub called Old Jet in his home county of Suffolk), singer Tom Chaplin felt that the time was right to try to rediscover himself as a songwriter.

Back in those early days in Battle, Chaplin, Rice-Oxley and former guitarist Dominic Scott all wrote songs that became the fixtures of the set-lists for the band's pub gigs. However, it soon became apparent that Rice-Oxley was becoming a songwriting force to be reckoned with. Following Scott's departure from the band in 2001, Chaplin felt up against it in the songwriting stakes - as Rice-Oxley was beginning to present material as strong as *This Is The Last Time*, *Bedshaped* and *Everybody's Changing*, Chaplin began to feel he couldn't compete. Whilst he still occasionally dabbled with writing, he had lost the confidence to present his ideas for consideration. As the success took hold, he closed down that part of himself in favour of simply being the voice (which, let's face it, isn't exactly a bad thing) - "Tim writes the songs, Tom sings them".

Whilst that formula brought the band 5 Number 1 records and fans across the globe, viewed from today there is little doubt that it played a part in Chaplin's issues with fame and self-loathing. Through those years, following a well-publicised spell in rehab in 2006 and the apparent reinvigoration that followed with 2008's *Perfect Symmetry*, the need to find an avenue to express himself creatively began to slowly re-surface. There



TOM CHAPLIN
The Wave
★★★★☆
ISLAND RECORDS

TOP TRACKS:

- See It So Clear
- Still Waiting
- Quicksand
- I Remember You

were occasional solo live appearances (a memorable rendition of *It's A Hard Life* at the Royal Albert Hall with Brian May and Roger Taylor of Queen for The Prince's Trust being a highlight), but no sign of any songs of his own.

Fast-forward again to mid-2013, and Chaplin asked his bandmates to be able to pause Keane to allow him to work on some solo material. "Tom's solo album" had been a long running joke amongst the band themselves and their fan-base, even since the days of *Hopes And Fears*. But with the hiatus now happening and interviews at the time publicising that he was planning to do a solo record, Chaplin entered his home studio at the beginning of 2014 full of anticipation and excitement - it was finally going to happen.

However, he quickly began to discover that saying you're going to write a solo album and actually doing it are two very different things. The songs weren't flowing freely, and the material he was coming up with was not really connecting... the spark, that special ingredient that turns a song from ordinary into something magical, just wasn't there. With Keane, he had taken it for granted: Tim would always come up with the goods, without fully appreciating how difficult it was to get those moments of gold in songs and the amount of effort and personal sacrifice it took. Entirely reliant on himself, his self-doubt began to take over again and the process ground to a halt. The old feelings of worthlessness began to resurface and before long, he'd privately given up and retreated back into cocaine binges to distract himself from the reality of life. Whilst the outside world patiently (and not so patiently) waited on news of the album, Chaplin was spiralling into the abyss and by the end of 2014 he had almost reached the end of the line.

It should have been the most joyous occasion of his life. Earlier in the year, his wife Nat had given birth to their first child Freya and, having seen first-hand the difficulties experienced by Rice-Oxley of being out on the road and away from your wife and young children, he had been determined not to repeat the mistake. But his drug addiction and anxiety issues were taking over, and he couldn't engage with either his wife or child as he should - he was becoming estranged from his family and those closest to him. Nat had almost given up on him - she loved him but couldn't cope with watching him slowly killing himself. Everything he'd had was slipping away from him, and in early 2015 following a three-day bender, he found himself alone and at his lowest point - he literally felt that he might die. As close to the edge as he had yet come, he made a promise to himself: "If I wake up tomorrow, things have to change".

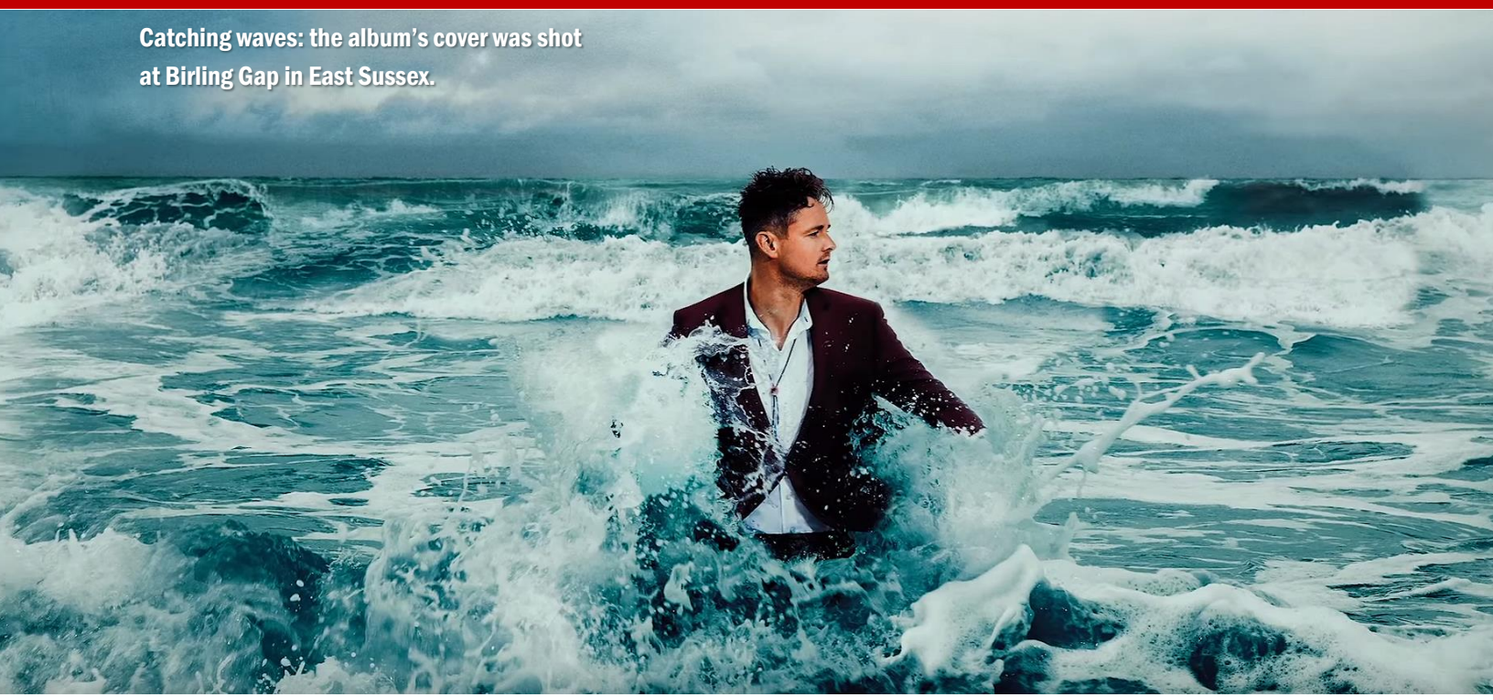
He did wake up. And unlike most promises of change made during the darkness of addiction and depression, he stuck to it. He realised how he was losing everything and everyone that mattered to him and the hurt that he was causing to those who loved him, and began the difficult and painful process of facing up to his problems. Through extensive therapy sessions, he gained insight into his issues with self-worth - issues that stemmed from long before Keane, back into his childhood and adolescence. The process of making peace with his past, of talking about his problems, of accepting himself for who he is and embracing his faults and failings, proved to be the most painful experience of his life but ultimately saved him. He has been able to reconnect to his wife, child, family and friends - they've got the Tom that they love back, and he has regained the ability to see the beauty in his life.



Clean break: Chaplin is now drug-free and ready to take on the world.

IT IS AGAINST that backdrop that we arrive at his debut solo album *The Wave*. The battle against his addiction and subsequent process of recovery at last unlocked the necessary part of himself he needed to be able to write songs that said what he wanted and that expressed what he had been going through. That thread of despair to hope is at the core of this album, and Chaplin has provided a vivid and explicit document of his experience with the damage of drug addiction. Through both the lyrics and the subsequent press interviews for the album, he has addressed the inspiration and subject matter of the songs with a remarkable degree of honesty and candour. Compared to the aforementioned "wobble" of 2006, it is night and day - back then, you got the impression that the band, management and record company were keen to sweep the issue under the carpet as quickly as possible and deflect attention from it (initially referring to it as "exhaustion", then avoiding in-depth discussion about it afterwards). Today, he is keen to discuss it - a follow-on from the therapy sessions, this openness also draws the listener in and helps them understand and appreciate the narrative of the album.

And what an album it is. Barring the occasional misstep (and let's face it, there are only a few albums ever recorded that don't have at least one or two weak spots), Chaplin has crafted a selection of songs that perfectly reflect his personality and experiences. Even at its bleakest points, this is a record that sounds beautiful - the melodies are catchy and strong, showing off that timeless voice to its best. It's amazing that in spite of everything that he's put his body through over the years, Chaplin's voice is sounding stronger and more expressive than ever. Production-wise, the album has the kind of expensive and expansive sheen that you would have expected - I would expect criticism from some quarters that it may be a little over-produced (a charge also levelled at Keane albums) and lacking in edginess, but I think for the most part it suits the material well. In Matt Hales (best known as Aqualung), Chaplin has found another musical kindred spirit - someone able to take his raw ideas and craft them into fully-fledged and sonically interesting pieces, whilst making sure the heart and emotion of the material still comes through clearly in the arrangements.



Catching waves: the album's cover was shot at Birling Gap in East Sussex.

THE ALBUM BEGINS with a mournful, foreboding string motif to introduce **STILL WAITING**. Described by Chaplin as the darkest moment on the record, it chronicles his paralysis by his addiction, anxiety and self-loathing, with the most metaphorical and allegorical lyrics of the record. He described himself as *"buried in the rubble"*, *"all in pieces, sick of all my secrets"* – reflecting on the fact that, in that typically British "stiff upper lip" way, he had always attempted to repress his problems from both himself and other people, even though they were slowly overwhelming and destroying him. The mid-section described *"phantoms in the shadows howl to devils on the edge of town"*, while *"vultures circle where my body lays"* – as if giving his addictions and personal neuroses a life, reaching out from behind to try to pull him down while he begs to be pulled from the wreckage of his own past. In spite of the darkness of the lyrics, this is one of the biggest and epic moments musically on the album – it builds from solo vocal and piano into a crescendo chorus, complete with massive drums, chiming guitars and the kind of soaring melody that only he can pull off. As an album opener and statement of intent with the record, it really doesn't get much better.

This is followed closely by **HARDENED HEART**, one of the songs debuted at his little solo Christmas show from Tunbridge Wells Forum in December 2015. The studio cut of this song loses the distinctive (though perhaps overly Keane-esque) piano riff intro in favour of a heavy string arrangement. The lyrics take the listener on Chaplin's journey of trying to turn the corner on his problems – even though he had stopped the drugs binges and was rebuilding his life and his relationships, he was still finding it difficult to replace the highs he'd experienced previously. *"It's such a beautiful world so why do I feel so down?"* describes a man searching for a way to reconnect with the joys and wonder of everyday life – he knows that each new day should be wonderful, but for some reason he still can't quite engage with it: he continues to feel he is "*hurting everyone I know, bringing everybody down so low, stuck along a road of sadness with nowhere to go"*. However, as the narrative progresses he begins to embrace life and those around him again – the first signs of hope emerging from the darkness. The signature sounds of this arrangement of the song are the strings and the big, Phil Spector-styled drums – the drums work brilliantly, but I am not completely sold on the string parts. It's a well-known cliché in indie music to try to make a song sound epic by adding orchestration, and whilst it works well here, I can't help but wish for it to be slightly stripped back. It would be interesting to hear the song approached with alternative instrumentation, but there's no denying that it's a powerful, emotive song regardless of the arrangement.

THE RIVER is another of the Tunbridge Wells debut songs to make the album cut. Chaplin has described it as a song about perils of nostalgia and of how that usually proves to be a dead-end, though he has also indicated that it can partially be viewed as a reflection of his position with Keane – because he could rely on Tim to write the songs and they would be a success, it allowed him to coast along without challenging himself and he was growing tired and unfulfilled. In the wider sense, it is about the commonly-held belief we can often have about things always being better in the past, and that our best days are often behind us – but that spending time wallowing in those days doesn't achieve anything – "*But every time I go back there, I feel I'm winding up nowhere"* and *"It's got to be time now to move on, the good old days they are long gone"*. Musically, the opening is quiet and reflective, with the delicate feel of Chaplin's favourites The Blue Nile – however, it then explodes into a huge chorus complete with a massive synth hook (credited by Chaplin to Matt Hales). At first this shift can sound a little jarring, but it quickly grows – and it's another very strong, singalong chorus that is bound to prove a hit at the forthcoming live shows.

After the bombast of that chorus, the tone shifts completely with **WORTHLESS WORDS**. This song is Chaplin's reflection on that final three-day binge that nearly killed him before he resolved to get himself clean and try to rebuild his life. It's a brutally honest lyric that can't fail to move anyone who has been affected by a friend or family member who has been suffering with addiction or mental illness – *"Gave my faithful heart over to rack and ruin"*, while Chaplin reflects on the likely view the outside world might give him: *"Cracked and crushed, somewhere another star-crossed has-been lost a world away"*. Nothing he has sung previously has been this deeply personal or moving – in keeping with the sombre mood of the lyrics, the song is mostly based around slow, minor piano chords with just some light synth in the latter stages giving a dreamier quality. For me, this is the bleakest moment on the record – with all the surface stripped away, you're left with a broken man, seeking redemption and forgiveness for having got things so wrong. But in spite of that bleakness, it is a beautiful song - an incredibly brave and touching moment for such a private man.

I REMEMBER YOU is just the lift needed after such a harrowing, quiet moment. The most overtly pop song on the record (and in some ways, the one that would feel least out of place on a Keane album), it was inspired by the therapeutic process Chaplin underwent as he recovered. Inspired by the theories on dream interpretation espoused by Carl Jung (regarded as the father of analytical psychology), he has described it as journey back in time to find himself as that frightened, lonely young boy he once was and to accept himself for who he is, rather than who he believed he should be. That acceptance can also be viewed as the young boy too – as if saying, "hang in there, there's tough times ahead but you'll get through it". It's a joyous song: full-throttle, full of driving guitars, insistent percussion and even

some thankfully non-offensive saxophone. It's already been identified as a fan favourite and rightly so – it's hard to not be swept up with the joy of it when you listen.

The next track **BRING THE RAIN** is one of the most experimental sounding on the album, and the one that bears Matt Hales' influence more than any other. Full of sparse, vaguely oriental-sounding synth parts, quirky guitar parts, and even including a vocoder on the intro verse vocals, it uplifts through another massive chorus before introducing a gospel choir for the outro. There's a lot going on in the arrangement, but it works – it translates the feeling of suspense and expectancy in the verses into the torrential downpour and release of a summer storm in the choruses. The lyrics describe the feeling of rebirth Chaplin experienced with the worst of his problems hopefully behind him for good: *"Bring the rain, fill the skies, 'til the earth is fit to burst, springing into life"*. A mark of how far he had come since those darkest days.

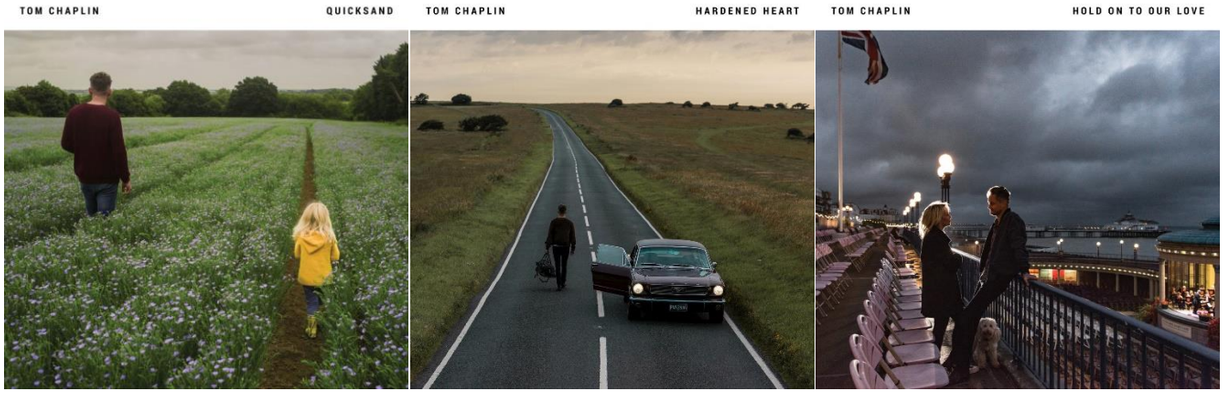
HOLD ON TO OUR LOVE is the first of Chaplin's love songs to his wife Nat, written when things still hung in the balance for their marriage. It was his plea to her not to give up on him, in spite of everything he had done – *"We have got to hope we're strong enough, whatever the world throws at us, we have got to hold on to our love"*. Again, it's one of the most deeply personal moments on the record, but the difficulty in maintaining a relationship is something that is universally identifiable. Musically, for the most part it would not have felt too out-of-place on *Strangeland* – it fits in with that mournful tone of songs like *Watch How You Go* and *The Starting Line*, with the piano providing the bedrock before being augmented with some light drums, picked acoustic guitar and violin. However, he takes it in a different direction for the outro as the gospel choir swells to an uplifting climax, before dropping back to finish with Tom's vocal alone. A beautiful song with a perfect arrangement.

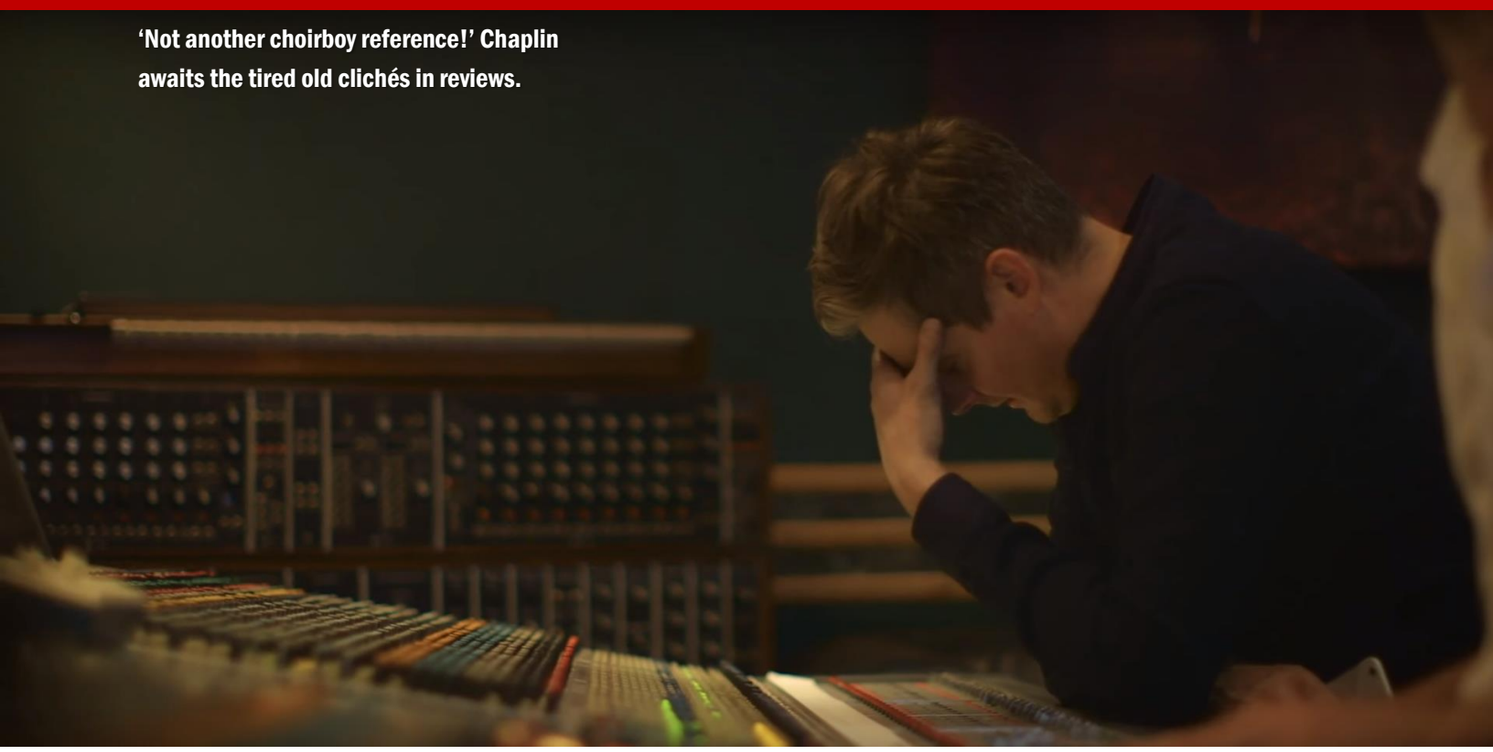
The first single **QUICKSAND** follows, and still proves to be one of the highlights of the album. Written by Chaplin for his daughter Freya to say "I know I haven't always been there until now, but in future, whatever life throws at you, I'll be here", it has a soaring chorus that still proves to be uplifting and invigorating. Vocally, this is Tom Chaplin at his finest – switching from the lower registers in the verses and exploding into an incredibly powerful soaring wail for the choruses. Lyrically, it is such a sweet, moving sentiment from a father to his young daughter – by not sugar-coating the realities of life and the fact that she'll face real lows as well as amazing highs (as experienced by Chaplin himself), he manages to articulate his feelings in a way that doesn't come across as schmaltzy or overly-sentimental.

Sadly, I don't feel that **SOLID GOLD** manages to straddle this line. Another song for Nat, it is a valiant attempt to articulate his realisation that he had treated his wife so poorly over the years because of his selfishness and the feeling that he wasn't worth it and that now he fully appreciated it and wanted to make amends. To my ears though, it comes across as a bit too bland and MOR – where Quicksand avoided schmaltz, this song embraces it and unfortunately just doesn't connect with me. However, I know I'm in a minority here as it has already proven to be a favourite on social media with fans following the listening party before the album release. There are some lovely touches – it's another great vocal performance, the duet section with Sarah Watkins (*"You'll never be lonely"*) is beautiful, and there's some great guitar work in there. But having said that, I still feel it is the weakest track on the album – though this is in no small part down to the strength of the other songs.

The penultimate track on the album is **SEE IT SO CLEAR**, and for my money is the finest on the record. In fact, I'd go so far as to say this ranks up there with the very best of the Keane back-catalogue – it's that good. Again, this is one where Matt Hales' work on the arrangement is magical – delicate, effected and reversed piano, electronic drums combining with acoustic drumming, clanging overdriven guitars, and a chorus as huge and as bright as the sun. In some ways a sister song to *I Remember You*, it explores Chaplin's relationship to himself as he makes peace with his past and accepts himself in the present. Lyrically, this contains some of the album's finest moments – particularly in the bridges where he realises that *"all these solid certainties, they have sadness underneath, and all these happy memories, they have spaces in-between"* before the release of the chorus: *"Oh I see it now, see it now, look back and see from shadows the loneliness reaching for me, I will give it a home so it's never alone, it was buried so deep"*. It's a lyric that stands up to repeated listening, and the melody is infectious – of all the songs on the album, this is the one that connected with me the most and it is the one I find myself randomly singing to myself. Just as the studio version features everyone singing as one (including his manager Beth Warren), this promises to be a real highlight of the live set that everyone can join in with. A triumphant expression of joy and self-acceptance that demonstrates Tom's new confidence in his abilities in terms of both singing and songwriting.

The final song on the record is the title track **THE WAVE**. Described by Hales as "a prayer for grace", this sees Chaplin trying to accept that everything that has happened to him is done and in the past, but also accepting that whilst the future will bring both happiness and sadness, it must be accepted with good grace and not fought against – whatever will be will be. The ocean provides a metaphor for life through the lyrics, the ebb and flow of good and bad, with the waves carrying him wherever it takes him next. With *"high hopes and young dreams, unrequited love, misplaced devotion, time will sweep these things away"*, he accepts that railing against the regrets and sadness of the past doesn't serve any real purpose, and it is more important to let go of those things and *"be carried by the wave"* to wherever life leads you next. *"Driven by the tide, heading for the shore, these lonely scattered pieces heading home"* – having the courage to let go and have faith that life will take you to where you need to be. It's a sad-sounding song, with its mournful piano given an added poignancy by the sombre horns of The Band and Bugles of The Rifles Regiment – melodically it's as beautiful a song as Chaplin has ever sung, having taken us full-circle from his darkest, bleakest period through his recovery to the point where he can now accept himself and embrace life again, both the good and the bad.

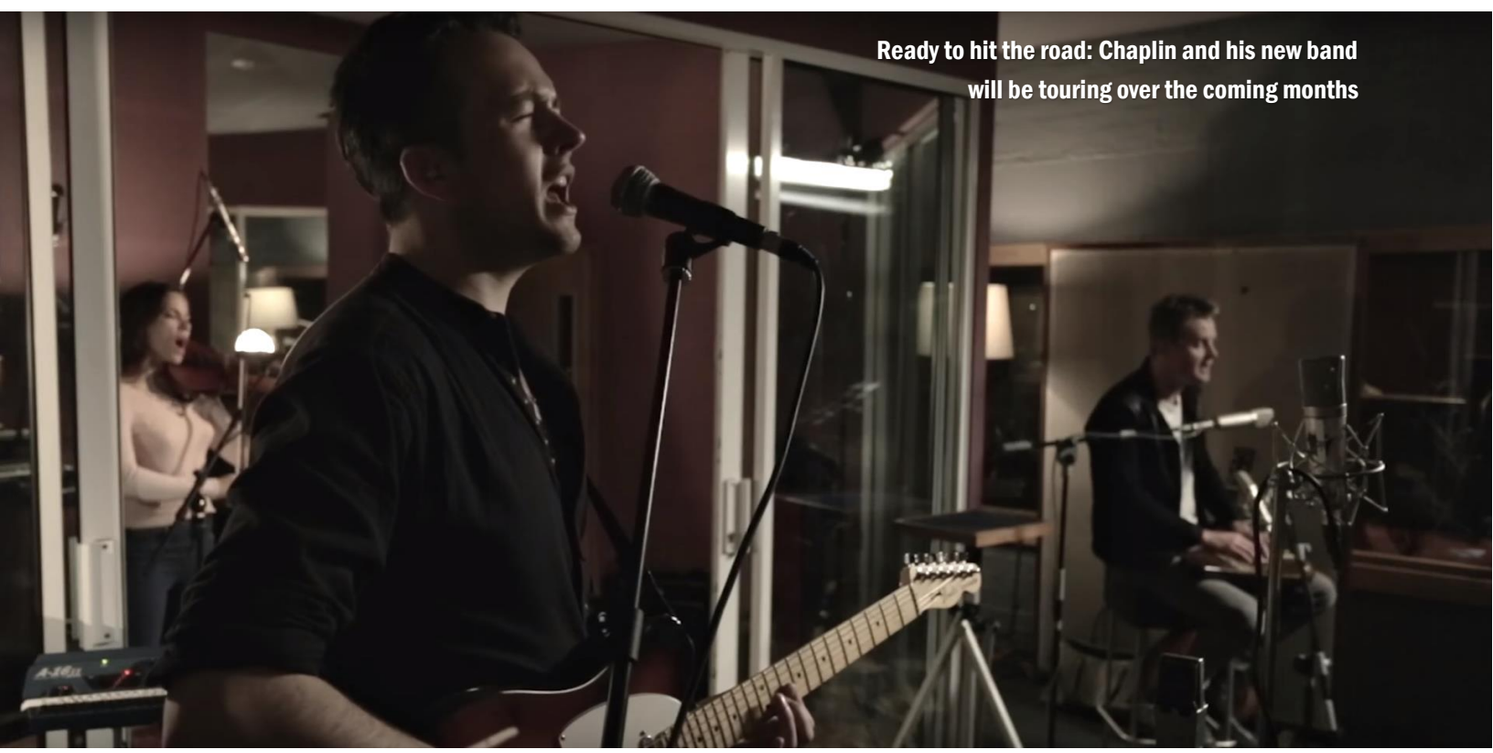




'Not another choirboy reference!' Chaplin awaits the tired old clichés in reviews.

VIEWED FROM THE OUTSIDE over the past couple of years, it was difficult to know exactly what kind of album Chaplin would produce on his own, largely due to the lack of potential ideas that made it into the public domain. I shared the fears of many that he might end up producing an overly earnest, saccharine sweet and disjointed – a collection of pleasant but unremarkable songs, rather than a powerful and deep album. But what has emerged with *The Wave* has far exceeded the expectations of even his most fervent supporters, allowing us to view him in a new light. Overall, this is a marvellous album – full of emotive songs, powerful, meaningful lyrics and beautiful melodies. It may have required its writer to take himself to the brink in order to unlock the material, but the end result makes the struggle more than worthwhile. Far more importantly of course, the main thing is that we now see Tom Chaplin happier, healthier and enjoying life again – possibly in a way he hasn't done in many years. That should not be viewed as a reflection on Keane or on his friendships or relationships until now – it is instead a resolution brought about by finally facing up to a lifetime's insecurities that he had previously only (unsuccessfully) attempted to nullify using alcohol and drugs. He has emerged from the process of therapy as a stronger man, able to now accept his responsibilities as a husband and father, and also able to feel he can stand on his own two feet as a creative force. Whether as a fan of Keane or as an outside observer, that is something we can all take heart in.

As for the future, it remains to be seen whether this album represents the beginning of new, ongoing solo chapter for Tom, or whether it will serve as a temporary diversion before returning to the "day job" with his friends and bandmates in Keane once the album and tour have been put to bed. If it is the latter (and I've always believed there is more to be done by the band), it can only be hoped that it would represent a new approach to the band's division of creative labour - following the route of contemporaries and friends Travis - by removing the strict divisions of roles and allowing the strongest songs through, regardless of who wrote them. But that is a discussion for another day... for now, we can simply enjoy the fact that, after many years of damaging addiction and personal creative stagnation, Tom has rediscovered and made peace with himself and his demons. *The Wave* may have been a long time coming, but the result is one of the most open, honest and touching albums you'll hear - simultaneously melancholic and uplifting, offering a new insight and depth to the man behind the image. Carried by the wave, given to the flow, and with a brighter future ahead. MART MCDONALD



Ready to hit the road: Chaplin and his new band will be touring over the coming months