

Wild Child

Fools, 2015

Wild Child doesn't want a place to hide. Song after song, town after town, they'll wear their hearts on their sleeves, addicted to the rush that only comes when thousands of strangers know all your secrets and sing them back to you, because they're their secrets, too.

"It's not necessarily the performing that's addictive, but being able to connect with that many people at once," says Kelsey Wilson, who shares lead vocal and songwriting responsibilities for the Austin-based seven-piece band with Alexander Beggins. "You feel like you're together in something—like you experience the whole thing together. It's family therapy with a lot of dancing."

Wild Child's third album *Fools* (out via Dualtone Records) is an ambitious collection of lush pop that takes sad stories and transforms them into an ebullient love letter to the power of music and the art of living with yourself.

Made up of Kelsey on violin and vocals, Alexander on ukulele and vocals, Evan Magers on keyboards, Sadie Wolfe on cello, Chris D'Annunzio on bass, Drew Brunetti on drums, and Matt Bradshaw on trumpet, Wild Child has built a sprawling grassroots following on the strength of high-spirited live shows that feel like self-contained joy benders, along with two precocious albums.

2011's *Pillow Talk* notched four no. 1 singles on indie pulse monitor Hype Machine, spurred on by music bloggers who fell early and hard for the quirky group. 2013's *The Runaround* upped the ante, making best-of lists and garnering glowing reviews and write-ups from NPR, *Paste*, *Pop Matters*, and many others. Then Wild Child hit TV, performing on the *Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson* and serving as the featured artists on *CBS Saturday Morning*. Since forming five years ago after Kelsey and Alexander met during a stint as members of a backup band for a Danish artist's U.S. tour, Wild Child has gone from playing shows for nine people to selling out venues across North America and Europe.

Not bad for an indie outfit who, up until now, has been thriving without radio spins or record label muscle. And it all started when two Texas kids too scared to sing for crowds discovered they wrote hauntingly good songs together.

Wild Child recorded *Fools* at Doll House Studios in Savannah, Georgia. Produced by Peter Mavrogeorgis and David Plakon with additional tracks helmed by red-letter guest producers Max Frost ("Break Bones") and Chris "Frenchie" Smith ("Trillo Talk"), *Fools* reveals that while Austin's favorite gang of lost boys and girls have grown up to become fiercely skilled musicians who have charmed the world, their faces remain grinning and often painted, spirits stubborn and free, barbs sharp and cathartic.

While writing for the album, Kelsey split from her fiancé of five years, then watched as her parents divorced. "It was the first time that I'd ever had writer's block," she remembers. "Then Bobby and I separated. Within a week, all of the lyrics just came out."

"She used this album as a platform to say a lot of things she wanted to say," Alexander says. "It's a story that's not exactly linear, but you hear someone going through something."

Kelsey and Alexander co-wrote all of the record's songs, while the title track was penned by the entire band—a first for the group. A complexly layered, funky gem, "Fools" saunters as Kelsey

and Alexander sigh, “If you have to go / I’ll play the fool,” a sly acknowledgement that no matter what else is going on in the relationship, it’d be easier to hold on than to let it fall apart.

The act of consciously playing the fool shows up repeatedly throughout the record, and Wild Child flaunts a postmodern comfort with perspective’s slippery grip on truth. “The Cracks” pulses with uncertainty as Kelsey delicately cries, “You went too far, went way too far / We went too far, went way too far,” while in “Bullets,” she croons, “I know you think I took a lot from you.” “Meadows” asks a lover how much they’re willing to sacrifice, while “Take It” and “Reno” tackle separation and trust.

The sole purely exuberant note on the album, “Bad Girl” is a Motown-inspired celebration of the birth of Kelsey’s first niece. “Oklahoma,” a harmony-soaked strings showcase that kicks off with an electro-pop tease, was slated for *The Runaround* but didn’t quite fit until *Fools*. Originally intended for *Pillow Talk*, “Stones” was mined from lyrics Kelsey penned when she was 15 years old. Now, it’s part bubbly piano-man ramble, part sweeping string-led drama, capped off by a brassy New Orleans breakdown—a perfect example of the band’s increasingly virtuosic ability to stretch and crisply fold genres into their ever-expanding repertoire.

“Break Bones” is a stunner—a big, bold, beautiful pop song praying a fight continues indefinitely, because that’s all that’s left. “Trillo Talk,” a last minute addition to the record and an ideal closer, winks to fan favorites “Pillow Talk” and “RilloTalk” and soars triumphantly. “It’s the last thought—everything is going to be okay...but it's not. But, it feels alright,” Alexander says.

Vocally, Alexander strolls, steady and wry, as Kelsey skips, runs, and hops, all whirly energy and instinctive phrasing. “I think my voice just sits nice underneath hers,” Alexander says, simply and accurately. “The two of us never really intended to be singers and still don’t really consider ourselves singers,” says Kelsey, without a hint of irony. NPR’s Ann Powers likened her voice to that of a “Jazz Age Broadway baby,” but bring up that and other praise, and Kelsey just laughs and emphasizes, “I don’t think of myself as a singer. I think of it just like talking. We’re just having a conversation.”

In their musical repartee, Wild Child doesn’t pull punches. Their songs sting as they groove, cutting lyrics massaged by cooing vocals and bouncy ukulele. So we’re dancing and laughing before we realize we’ve got tears in our eyes, entranced by Wild Child’s dizzying contradiction: sour truths that sound so sweet.

“The instruments may belong in a granola commercial, but what we’re saying is often dark and angry and bitter,” says Kelsey. “It wasn’t until Alexander and I started writing music together that we were like, ‘Damn. Are we sad?’”

“There is a beauty in lyric writing that is almost too honest,” Alexander says. “We’ve always tried to poke holes in that terrible thing that nobody really wants to think about.”

Fools is an unashamed breakup album, but it’s more than last rites for lovers. The record also bids farewell to the traditional lives Kelsey and Alexander had thought lie in store.

“We’re about to live day to day for a long time, and our relationships are going to fall apart,” Kelsey says. “Our home lives are going to fall apart. And there’s nothing we can do about it. So, the record is also about letting go of expectations, just playing the fool. *Fools* is a release—a blind step out.”

<https://www.wildchildsounds.com>

