

Equals album biography

Before assembling material for The Alarm's first album of new music in eight years, Mike Peters paused to take stock. To move forwards, he first had to look back and acknowledge the back-story of a group whose songs of defiance have traditionally been fuelled by an almost umbilical bond between band and audience. In the aftermath of 2010's *Direct Action* album, Mike Peters embarked on an ambitious renovation programme that commemorated a string of Alarm 30th anniversaries by revisiting some of the band's landmark releases from the Eighties, a decade that saw a plucky band of young Welsh guitar-slingers break straight outta Rhyl, with plenty of street fighting spirit and an implacable belief in the communal power of music. Mike and the group began by re-working some of their earliest songs on 2011's *The Sound And The Fury* before re-imagining a brace of their mid-Eighties albums, *Declaration* and *Strength*, by re-recording them in full, and taking the new versions out on the road with a marathon world tour.

'I wanted to address our artistic history,' says singer, guitarist and songwriter Mike Peters. *'There wasn't a massive need for new music purely for the sake of it around that time, because we have an audience who are very attached to our history. I also wanted to go back to the start and re-evaluate everything. I had songs that had followed me around for all of my adult life, and I wanted to remake them as if they had been written today. The meanings of some lines change as you go through life, and I wanted to reflect that. I knew it would divide opinion, but I felt it would open doors, too. I wanted to shake up our audience and myself, so I re-wrote some of the original lines and re-introduced verses I had edited out. It had quite an effect on me: the past started to inform how I was writing my new songs and I was able to carry that spirit forward into something new.'*

That something new is **Equals**, The Alarm's first new album since *Direct Action* and a barnstorming collection of 11 songs that act as a retrenchment of original values and a poignant reflection of the tough times Mike and his wife Jules have been through in recent years. Having recovered from lymph cancer in 1996, Mike was diagnosed with a rare form of leukaemia in 2005 and, after an initial recovery, he suffered a relapse in 2015. To compound an already terrifying situation, Jules, who plays piano and sings backing vocals, was diagnosed with breast cancer just after. All band activity was put on hold as the pair underwent treatment and it is only now, with both in remission, that The Alarm are firing on all cylinders again. The emotional repercussions, though, are all too evident in the spirit of life-affirming optimism in the face of adversity that runs through **Equals**.

'The songs were built out of what I had become,' says Mike. *'I learnt a lot about myself and my relationship with Jules, and it's all there in the music. I didn't set out to write about what we were going through. If there was any music in me, it was going to come out naturally, and that's what happened. I didn't have a guitar by my side as my wife was having investigative surgery for breast cancer. All I had were these incredibly strong feelings that I found myself putting into words and writing down onto my phone without even thinking they might form the basis for songs. It was only after we'd both reached some sort of equilibrium that I realised I had all these lyrics. One day, I put the words on the studio floor and realised I could make sense of them as music. I don't even remember writing most of these lyrics, because my mind had been focused on more important matters.'*

With so much material – 23 finished songs in all – Mike initially envisaged The Alarm's return with a double album (which started out under the all-embracing handle of **Blood Red Viral Black**). *'All the songs had a similar emotional core although there are also fundamental differences,'* explains Mike. *'So I divided the songs into two categories - inwards / red / blood and outwards / black / viral. Road-testing the new songs live helped me to decide which ones were right for Equals.'*

Produced by George Williams, who previously worked on 2005's *Under Attack*, **Equals** opens with a torrent of epic rock numbers such as *Two Rivers* and *Beautiful*, which see Peters singing about coming to terms with the past before moving to enjoy life to the full. With Mike and Jules joined by Joe Strummer & The Mescaleros drummer Smiley and guitarist James Stevenson, who cut his teeth with Chelsea, Gen X and The Cult, the album encompasses twin harmony guitars, pounding drums and electronic layering, while guest guitarist Billy Duffy (The Cult) helps Peters and Stevenson blend acoustic and electric sounds on *Coming Backwards*.

'One of the things that set us apart during the early days of The Alarm was the way we put electric pickups into acoustic guitars,' says Mike. 'That gave us a unique style, but we never explored that in full as we progressed. So I went back and created the ultimate, custom-made Alarm guitar – one with an electric pickup that could also be played acoustically. As I was preparing this album, I also experimented with loop pedals and other effects. I listened to Ed Sheeran, The White Stripes and The Black Keys, who use old / new school technology to create a big sound through just one or two musicians. In the rehearsal room, I learnt to create the sound of a full band while I was turning the lyrics into songs. The technology set me free.'

Equals is the latest chapter in an inspirational story that has seen The Alarm sell six million albums while clocking up 17 Top Fifty singles in the UK. Formed in 1981 in the Welsh seaside resort of Rhyl, the original band of Peters, Dave Sharp, Eddie MacDonald and Nigel Twist broke through on the back of the singles *Unsafe Building*, *The Stand*, *Sixty Eight Guns* and *Where Were You Hiding When The Storm Broke?*, their music a passionate blend of amped-up acoustic guitars, harmonica and Mike's stirring voice. A string of successful albums saw them bracketed alongside U2, The Waterboys, Simple Minds and Big Country as part of Eighties rock's distinctive Celtic fringe. After an emotional swansong at Brixton Academy in 1991, the original members went their separate ways, with Mike launching a solo career and joining forces with Billy Duffy in a short-lived band called Coloursound. The lingering allure of his old group proved hard to resist, however, and Peters entered a new millennium back at the helm of The Alarm. The group's activities since that 1999 re-launch have included an ambitious album project, the *Poppy Fields Bond*, that saw them release five CDs in five months in 2003 and a 'fake band' escapade the following year in which they concealed their true identity by releasing a single, 45 RPM, as The *Poppy Fields*. They created a global news story when the song unexpectedly hit the UK charts.

Today, with Mike's health now 'back on an even keel' and Jules in remission, The Alarm are looking forward to promoting **Equals** with characteristic vigour. Peters wouldn't want it any other way. Not long after his second diagnosis, he founded a charity foundation, Love Hope Strength, and has since registered over 170,000 individuals to the International Bone Marrow Donor Registry. A man who refuses to be beaten, his drive in adversity is truly something special.

'I had a very solid upbringing, with strong parents who were always supportive,' says Mike. 'They never had a problem with me becoming a punk or starting a band. Later on, all my dreams starting coming true. I appeared on Top Of The Pops, toured America, sang onstage with Bob Dylan and met the love of my life. Then, suddenly, all of life's certainties were ripped away. I didn't know how I was going to respond, but writing songs helped. It would have been natural to think: "Why me?". But I didn't want to put those sentiments into song, so I had to accept what was happening and find a way of moving forwards. Looking back, the situation allowed me to keep on doing what I've always aspired to do as an artist – which is to write honestly and openly about life without fear.'

Adrian Thrills