

THE AVALANCHES keep sampling from becoming a lost art. After a sixteen-year absence, Australian plunderers Robbie Chater and Tony Di Blasi return with *Wildflower*, an epic—but whimsical—journey through obscure outsider-artist vinyl samples that shows life is dark and, ultimately, beautiful.

# RARE EARTH

by Alice Price-Styles

“Doo-doo-doo-doo-doo / It’s a world of fantasy.” The comforting choral refrain from the Five Stairsteps’ “World of Fantasy” perfectly captures my feelings, and I daresay most fans’ feelings, toward the Avalanches, who sample the 1966 Stairsteps song in “Light Up” on their long-awaited sophomore album, 2016’s *Wildflower*.

All music, to varying extents, can be a means of escapism, but there is something so truly captivating about the way that the Avalanches layer up mind-boggling amounts of samples to create the most whimsical and nostalgic make-believe world full of sound bites and funky grooves. Pressing play on the Avalanches is like falling down a rabbit hole and coming out the other end into an aural utopia where Blowfly shakes a tail feather with Françoise Hardy at Club Med.

“It’s a weird sort of paradox, because [music] can really transport you,” Avalanches cofounder Robbie Chater reflects. “And especially using samples, it can play with time, using old recordings, and there’s the history of that record. So in one sense, you’re playing with time and nostalgia, but in the moment [of listening] you’re extremely present.” It’s true. It’s a very visceral and profound form of escapism, in ways more immediate than most everyday-life experiences. Chater continues: “Music soundtracks your life; it’s connected to what you’re experiencing at that time. It’s wonderful like that.”

Forming in the late ’90s in Melbourne, Australia, the group’s lineup has varied somewhat over the years and now consists of just Robbie Chater and Tony Di Blasi (previous members included Darren Seltmann, James Dela Cruz, Dexter Fabay, Gordon McQuilten, Manabu Etoh, and Peter Whitford).

“I lived in my imagination a lot as a kid,” Chater admits but states that he wasn’t exposed to vast amounts of art and culture growing up in suburban Australia. “I think that came later as I really began dedicating myself to making music. It was always sample-based music from the start. So it was a parallel journey of my musical career and searching for what I need to make songs but also of discovery and finding out what I like. As a young kid, I absorbed my old man’s record collection, which was the Band and Bob Dylan and all that kind of stuff, but I wasn’t exposed to a wide world of film or anything like that. There was a piano in the house, and then I sort of taught myself how to play guitar. When I was young, I was always really curious and loved music, I always fucked around making it but didn’t think it was something I would want to do. When I was twelve, thirteen, I became obsessed with hard rock and playing guitar and growing my hair long, ’cause AC/DC are massive in Australia. Suburban Australian music, you know? I just wanted to smoke pot and play guitar and listen to heavy metal,” Chater says with a laugh, and adds, “I knew that there was a path there somewhere for me.” It makes me think of Joseph Campbell’s theories on following your bliss.

“And then about fourteen,” he continues, “I started mucking around with four-track tape recorders, making loops and recording by myself. I guess that was the beginning of the journey that I’m still on. [A few years later] I was sharing a place with Tony. We were seventeen, had just moved out of home, and were doing our thing, taking drugs, and listening to music,” Chater says, laughing. “A really close friend of ours, Jo, lived with us as well, and then she met Darren [Seltmann]

and started seeing him, and he moved into the house as well. It was this small house meant for two people and ended up being four of us living there. The three of us started making music together, and it kind of began there.”

After the guys settled on the name the Avalanches, they released their debut single, “Rock City,” in 1997 on Trifekta Records. This led to their first EP, *El Producto*, being released on Wondergram Records later that year. Then, based on the success of the EP and playing shows with big-name artists such as Stereolab, Public Enemy, and the Beastie Boys, the group was signed to Modular Recordings to start working on their first full-length album.

Recording for their debut LP began in 1998, a time which Chater describes as “a whirlwind...eighteen months of real creativity.” It was in 2000 that they released *Since I Left You*, a seamless sonic journey that dances with nostalgia, grooves, euphoria, and melancholy. It is rumored to contain over 3,500 samples, so it makes a lot of sense when Chater talks about the records that influenced and inspired him and cites De La Soul’s seminal debut: “First [record I] fell in love with was probably *3 Feet High & Rising*. It blew my mind. I think that was the first sample record I heard. I didn’t know what it was, but I was intrigued, and I knew that I liked it. That record is still a part of the DNA of what we do. There’s a sort of joyous feeling in the production. And like a lot of musicians, I went through a phase of being obsessed with the Beach Boys and the weirder ’70s Beach Boys stuff. They also had this sort of strange humor, and in my head there’s a place where those two different things, where there’s common ground, where we forged our own identity from.”





There is indeed a unique mélange of playfulness, sadness, and ecstasy in their music, and when asked how this relates to reality, Chater simply muses: “Life is—simultaneously, it’s beautiful and it’s fucked sometimes.”

*Since I Left You* received high acclaim upon its release, with singles “Frontier Psychiatrist” and “Since I Left You” being praised as prime examples of the possibilities of turntablism and the wonders of the plunderphonic style. But the longer that the Avalanches took to follow it up with a sophomore album, the more mythic *Since I Left You* and the group

itself became. There were numerous false or unfulfilled announcements from the band and record label, which led many to believe that a follow-up album would never arrive. After sixteen years full of cryptic messages and high hopes, the group finally released *Wildflower* in the summer of 2016. Like a Technicolor magical mystery tour peppered with rappers, cartoon characters, and the acidic spectrum of human emotions, *Wildflower* is a rich and unforgettable trip.

“On this new record, we wanted it to feel like you’re moving through a city, to hear snatches of conversation and really get

a feel of where you are,” says Chater. “We wanted snatches of overheard conversation rather than big chunks, so the listener brings their own interpretation to it and fills in the blanks. It’s more powerful that way than telling someone exactly what’s going on.”

The most striking difference between *Since I Left You* and *Wildflower* is that *Wildflower* features an array of guests, including MF Doom, Warren Ellis, Toro y Moi, Danny Brown, and Camp Lo. At first, the lineup of collaborators seems as eclectic as the sample material sourced (who would have imagined Biz Markie and Father John Misty appearing





on the same record?). But upon deeper inspection, the commonality between them all becomes clear: a certain originality or non-conforming *je ne sais quoi*. Chater says that for this project they were attracted to unique artists who are “hard to categorize,” and he explains the method to their madness: “There needed to be parallels, because a lot of the music we were sampling was—nowadays, they call it the outsider artists—but strange old recordings and musical mavericks who were doing their own thing. That was really inspiring to us during the making of this record, so people like Danny Brown or Warren Ellis had that quality.” *Wildflowers*, as it were. “In terms of the vocalists, it was pretty hard; we had to think carefully before we approached anyone. It was a long process finding the right voice; even down to the tone and the timbre of people’s voices, we were pretty specific.”

And there are some sublime pairings on the record: Toro y Moi on “If I Was a Folkstar” is pure enchantment; Jonathan Donahue (of Mercury Rev/the Flaming Lips) blends into the swirling magic of “Colours” like a turning kaleidoscope; Biz Markie’s inimitable voice and vibe work in tandem with the playful boom-bap style of “The Noisy Eater”; and the combination of David Berman (of Silver Jews) and Josh Tillman (Father John Misty) on the hypnotic final track “Saturday Night Inside Out” is the perfect closing note.

As can be imagined, over the sixteen years between albums, a plethora of music was made. Not everything could make the final mix, and there are enough yet-unheard-but-surely-dope collaborations that didn’t make the cut to make a fan’s head implode, including work with the one and only Kid Creole. “He was so lovely, so cool,” Chater says. “That was one of my favorites, actually. It’s this long spoken-word thing, and the

music’s really beautiful. Some days, he would just sign off like, ‘Life is beautiful’—stuff like that.”

Of the anticipation and pressure that inevitably built up over the years, Chater says it was “something that we had to work past” in order to be free in what they were doing. “The last few years, we weren’t thinking about it at all. We got to a place where we were comfortable with what we were doing and just doing it for us.” By transcending the external pressures and expectations, they were able to distill the sounds and textures that best fit together as a cohesive whole and finish up *Wildflower*. It was ultimately an intuitive and personal process, according to Chater, despite the many onlookers: “We knew when this one was right, when the structure and all the songs were there. That’s something we just knew, and that no one could probably tell us.”

Hearing Chater talk about the experience of creating music is just wonderful because you can sense that the purity of his love for it is still very much intact: “Sometimes, songs can be painful and laborious to finish, but as that initial spark of an idea is coming along, I’m just high. It’s amazing, because it’s connecting with a feeling inside and creating a loop between how I’m feeling, and it’s starting to actually sound like that, feeding back into how I feel. [Making music is] a real privilege, actually. It’s a beautiful thing.”

To accompany *Wildflower*, the group worked with video artists Soda\_Jerk on the short mash-up film *The Was*. “To me, that piece better than anything sums up the feeling of the record,” Chater says. “I think it really captures something, just how beautiful life is and how sad it can be as well.”

*The Was* is a perfect video translation of the Avalanches’ style, sampling clips of *Good Burger*, *The Wiz*, *Space Is the Place*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, *The Warriors*,

*Beat Street*, and countless other films. It’s like it teases you with every possible epoch you could have been born into or ways that you could style yourself and your life now. Just like the Avalanches’ music, it awakens you to see the scope of life out there, to marvel at it, and to want to embrace it all. When asked about this aspect, Chater sums it up perfectly: “It’s an art; I constantly have to force myself to not fall into a mental routine or rut. The human mind loves patterns and loves getting into the same old thing day by day. I find that I really have to break free of that to stay inspired and live life to the fullest. I guess, I’m always chasing that feeling with the music and with the piece *The Was*. Maybe it’s not [the same] for other people, but personally, I just have to really constantly remind myself to kind of wake the fuck up. There’s so much out there to experience and a lot of the world just seems so corporate and safe. I want to shake things up, in my own life and externally.”

“The only bad part about flying is having to come back down to the fuckin’ world,” narrates Rat at the beginning of the 1984 documentary *Streetwise*. The pertinent line is cut into “Zap!” on *Wildflower* and holds a sentiment that could also relate to listening to the Avalanches and entering their world of wonder and whimsy. The only bad part is when the wax runs out and the needle stops. When an Avalanches LP ends, you have to come back to the real world; but, hopefully, you come back renewed, transformed, inspired, and a little shaken up. ●