**KING TUFF // *The Other***

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Sub-Pop

When asked to describe the title track from his new record, Kyle Thomas—aka King Tuff—takes a deep breath. “It’s a song about hitting rock bottom,” he says. “I didn't even know what I wanted to do anymore, but I still had this urge—this feeling—like there was this possibility of something else I could be doing… and then I just followed that possibility. To me, that’s what songwriting, and art in general, is about. You’re chasing something, there is something out there calling to you and you’re trying to get at it. ‘The Other’ is basically where songs come from, it’s the hidden world, it’s the mystery. It’s the invisible hand that guides you whenever you make something. It’s the thing I had to rediscover—the sort of voice I had to follow—to bring me back to making music again in a way that felt true and good.”

After years of non-stop touring, culminating in a particularly arduous stint in support of 2014’s *Black Moon Spell*, Thomas found himself back in Los Angeles experiencing the flipside of the ultimate rock and roll cliche—that of an exhausted musician suddenly unsure where to go or what to do, held prisoner by a persona that he never meant to create, that bore little resemblance to the worn out person they now saw in the mirror. Thomas was suddenly at odds with the storied rock and roll misfit mythology that he’d spent the past ten years, four full-length albums, a handful of EPs, and multiple live records, unwittingly bringing to life.

“At that point I had literally been on tour for years,” recalls Thomas. “It was exhausting. Physically and mentally. At the end of it I was like, I just can't do this. I’m essentially playing this character of King Tuff, this crazy party monster, and I don’t even drink or do drugs. It had become a weird persona, which people seemed to want from me, but it was no longer me. I just felt like it had gotten away from me.”

For a time, Thomas involved himself in projects that gave him space from all things King Tuff, and allowed him to, as he says, “go out and play music without having to actually be the boss.” Eventually, after being asked to play a handful of solo shows, Thomas began to see a way through to making new music. “I’d never played a show with just an acoustic guitar,” he says. “It just seemed like the scariest thing. I knew I wanted to write some new songs that could stand up in that kind of setting, which really opened the door to a new way of working.”

“I knew I wanted to record myself on my own time in my own space, so I put together a studio in a room in my house we called the Pine Room. It was like being inside of a wood-paneled spaceship. Suddenly I had all of this new crazy gear that I had no idea how to use in any sort of technical or ‘correct’ way. I just embraced the beauty of *not* knowing, which I think is where you get interesting things happening." Thomas self-produced the record, as he did his debut, *Was Dead*, but on a far grander scale, this time playing every instrument aside from drums and saxophone. He pulled Shawn Everett (War On Drugs, Alabama Shakes) in to assist with the mixing process. "From the moment I started recording, it was like going home, like I had finally found myself again.”

The ten tracks that would eventually become *The Other* represent a kind of psychic evolution for the King Tuff. No less hooky than previous records, the new songs ditch the goofy rock and roll bacchanalia narratives of earlier records in favor of expansive arrangements, a diversity of instrumentation, and lyrics that straddle the fence between painful ruminations and reconnecting with that part of yourself that feels childlike and creative and not corroded by cynicism. The soulful and cosmic new direction is apparent from the album’s first moments: introduced by the the gentle ringing of a chime, acoustic guitar, and warm organ tones, “The Other” is a narrative of redemption born of creativity. As Thomas sings about about being stuck in traffic, directionless, with no particular reason to be alive, he hears the call of “the other,” a kind of proverbial siren song that, instead of leading towards destruction, draws the narrator towards a kind of creative rebirth. Elsewhere, tracks like “Through The Cracks” and “Psycho Star” balance psychedelia with day-glo pop hooks. “*The universe is probably an illusion, but isn’t it so beautifully bizarre?*” he asks on “Psycho Star,” providing one of the record’s central tenets. At a time when everything in the world feels so deeply spoiled and the concept of making meaning out of the void seems both pointless and impossible, why not try?

“I'm talking about things that I don't necessarily feel good about, that aren’t easy,” says Thomas, who views the record as a way to push back against that internal voice that so often keeps us from trying new things. “I feel like this relates to a song like ‘Birds of Paradise,’ which is definitely about trying hold on to that childlike part of yourself that doesn't care what anyone thinks, the endless curiosity and unbounded creativity.” It’s a sentiment that pops up throughout the record, particularly in the preening funk of “Raindrop Blue,” and the ripping “Ultraviolet,” tracks that crack open new sonic territory for King Tuff, complete with rainbow keyboards, strutting basslines, hot-buttered bongos, harmonicas, angelic backing vocals, and strikingly danceable grooves. After nine songs that take on everything from creative insecurity, the isolating evils of technology, and the redemptive power of art, the album wraps up with “No Man’s Land.” The song is a slow-build gospel-tinged stunner that comes complete with harp strums and pillows of space synths for Thomas’ beleaguered lyrics (“*I’m going down to the forgotten part of town with roses and rubies in my hands”*), which sound both weary and strangely at peace. It’s a song about ending up where you need to be, even if you have no idea how you might have arrived there. “It’s about attaining The Other,” says Thomas. “‘No Man’s Land’ is a vision of the afterlife, it’s where the journey eventually leads you. It’s some other plane of existence that you kind of aspire to. It’s ending up inside the dream.”

While it would be easy to think of *The Other* as a kind of reinvention for King Tuff, Thomas views the entire experience of the record as a kind of psychic reset, and something not totally removed from what he’s done in the past. “I can’t help but sound like me,” he says. “It’s just that this time I let the songs lead me where they wanted to go, instead of trying to push them into a certain zone. King Tuff was always just supposed to be me. When I started doing this as a teenager, it was whatever I wanted it to be. King Tuff was never supposed to be just one thing. It was supposed to be *everything*.”