

THE IVOR NOVELLO ESSAYS  
WHITE LIES  
THE VIEW FROM THE STARTING GATE



“We’ve had a fantastic year. We definitely were not expecting our album to go to number one. It’s not a mainstream record. We were very fortunate with the timing of it. People have reacted to our music in an incredible way, in a way that none of us would ever have dreamed of when we were growing up and writing rubbish songs after school as teenagers. Ever since we started the whitelies Myspace, it’s been amazing.

The Myspace was the first thing we did as a band. Obviously, we were in another group before, Fear Of Flying. We weren’t going anywhere, we felt we were wasting our lives. The main turning point was when we wrote *Unfinished Business*. We started White Lies with that. We felt the power, the emotion. We knew we wanted to write an album’s worth of material like that. It seemed the songs we’d been writing before were irrelevant at that point. It just made sense to start something new.



From the beginning, we aimed to keep the Myspace very simple, and through that make it very cool. We started with the black background and put a video and a few songs up and nothing much else really. It all took off from there. We got a lawyer, Ben Mawson. He was the first person who took the band on and gave us our initial guidance and set up meetings with management. We decided to wait a rather long time, about five or six months, before we played as White Lies. We did that on purpose so we could generate a lot of interest before we played that first show. People had no idea what we looked like or how old we were. Within a few days of our first gig in February 2008, we signed with Fiction.

What drew us towards Fiction was the people who worked there, especially Jim Chancellor who is an amazing A&R man and has such a passion for music. He realised what we wanted to do almost before we did, and how to guide us and point us in the right direction. Fiction feels very much like an independent label within a huge corporation, Universal, which was something which really appealed to us. We weren't going for a huge amount of money, we just wanted everything to be in place. The moment we signed our record deal was like 'wow we can actually do this, this could be a career, this could be our chance'. The publishing deal we got a little while after. We decided on Chrysalis Music Publishing because of the people who work there, especially Alison Donald, the person who signed us. We have a lot of trust and belief in their work ethic, and the way their company works. Their roster is fantastic, full of well-respected musicians and songwriters.

With *Fear Of Flying*, we had sort of scratched the surface of the music industry. We had a couple of singles out, limited edition vinyl. We were introduced to Stephen Street by one of our good friends at school, who happens to be his son. Stephen very kindly offered us some time in his recording studio. We spent a couple of days in there. It's beyond me why he had any faith in our band and why he gave us that opportunity in the first place.

We also toured a couple of times around the UK so we did get a taste of what was to come and we certainly learnt the wrong way to do things which definitely helped us move *White Lies* on very quickly from that initial phase. Even though our songs weren't very good, I look back on *Fear Of Flying* with fondness. It was a definite learning curve. It was really important to have that experience. We haven't experienced any horror stories. *Fear Of Flying* basically got ignored by every record company there is under the sun. It was a very hard thing to deal with. Maybe a few years ago, we would have signed a deal and had a chance to make three albums and by the second or third, we'd have made something like the album we've just made as *White Lies*. In the current climate, if we'd made an album as *Fear Of Flying*, we'd have been dropped. So we were fortunate to have that second chance as *White Lies*.

*Later . . . with Jools Holland* was the last thing we did before we recorded our album. It was a statement doing that show early on. We were absolutely terrified, we hadn't even played 20 gigs at the time, but it was really exciting. It meant we could go into the studio with a sense of reassurance about the future. We went to Brussels to make the album. The ICP Studios were absolutely fantastic, with vintage equipment, almost priceless.



Charles Cave, our bassist, is a fantastic lyricist. The lyrics he wrote for *Unfinished Business* were very different, original. It's a very brave thing to do to try and write a story within a song and have it make sense. It was very clever of him.

Usually, the process is that Charles and I will sit down in my house at my keyboard in my living room for a couple of days and we'll write the basics of the song together. We'll start to get a rough melody line and a chord progression together using the lyrics that he's written. Very shortly after that, we'll go into the rehearsal studio and we'll work with Jack [Lawrence-Brown, drums], all three of us, all doing the song from the beginning. After a couple of months, we'll have about three songs to go and demo. We'll have a rough version which we'll usually cut up and start to change all over again. It's a very long process between the initial writing of the song and finishing it but that's just how we work. We're real perfectionists.

A lot of bands do it the other way around to us. They start playing the songs live before they go in to a studio to record them but we can't work that way. Live, we're a four piece but when we write and record we're only a three piece. The guitar parts don't get written until we go into the studio and I can stop playing the keyboards and start playing the guitar. It's a strange way of working. Once we've demoed the songs, we have to learn how to play them live afterwards.

We pretty much wrote half of the album when we were in the studio, that's why it sounds very immediate and spontaneous. *To Lose My Life*, the title track, wasn't really working until we stumbled across the form it's in now, very near the end of the recording process. It's a great introduction to the band, it's got a catchy chorus and it has all the elements of our sound. It's very easy for people to connect with the song, with the emotions in the lyrics and the subject matter. That, along with our other song *Death*, our first two singles, are the best introduction to the band.

The last two tracks, *The Price Of Love* and *Nothing To Give*, hint at what's to come. They're the most accomplished songs in terms of their complexity and their arrangements. Sonically they're the most exciting.

It doesn't surprise me that people identify with our music because the songs deal with feelings and emotions and subject matter that everyone, no matter how young or how old they are, will have experienced at least at some point in their life. There's a misconception with our band and lyrics that we're fascinated by death. In fact, death is more a metaphor for loss. It's about losing someone or something or a relationship, feelings associated everyone can relate to.

The Joy Division comparison is a little lazy. There's such a coldness and morbidity to Joy Division. Our music is warmer and more organic. The main reasons we get compared are the way that I sing, and also the decision by all of us at the beginning to wear all black clothes on stage. We decided to do that because, when we were growing up, with the whole new rave scene in the UK, people were starting to judge bands more on what they were wearing – the crazy outfits, the bright colours, the weird patterns – than their music. We wanted to remove ourselves from that. Wearing



all black was a very neutral colour, it would almost blend into the background and people would focus on the music rather than on what we looked like.

We're not really intense young men. We do have a lot of fun as a band. Maybe the public doesn't really see that, but we don't take ourselves too seriously. There's a common misconception that we're very depressed, introverted and weird people because of the nature of our music. Our music is therapeutic. It's an amazing thing to be able to sing loud and high about some pretty dark things, dark subject matter. The music itself is often quite uplifting, euphoric, whereas the subject matter of the lyrics is darker and more introverted. It's a nice release of those emotions and those feelings. It gives me a wonderful sense of euphoria when I'm singing the songs and after a show. If we'd lived through the subject matter in the lyrics, we'd be pretty much insane but we leave that behind after we get off stage and we live our lives like normal people.

We have played abroad a lot. Our management wanted to get people all over the world excited very early on in the same way that they were in the UK. It's also been invaluable for us as a learning experience. We were offered some amazing festivals last year, Fuji Rock in Japan and Lollapalooza in the US, so it just made sense to make that step very early on. When we finished recording our album, we were straight away touring the entire world. .

Radiohead is a band we look up to. I would love our path to move in the same direction that theirs has. They've never sacrificed their integrity, never made a record they didn't want to make, never made something that's conventionally commercial. One of the other things I admire about them is that they're not ridiculously famous as individuals, they still manage to remain very private, mysterious. Yet they are still one of the most famous and successful bands in the world.

We took a leaf out of Radiohead's book when we released a collector's item limited edition of the album on 7" vinyl through the website which included a demo of one of our songs, *The Price Of Love*, and also a stripped back version of a track called *Nothing To Give* which had some amazing string parts on it originally. The version on there is just a vocal that sounds like Scott Walker. It's a lovely collector's item.

We certainly are very disciplined as people and as a band. We also we look out for each other and make sure that we can always work as a strong unit. We've wanted to be in a band for our whole lives and now we've been given the opportunity to do it, we want to grab hold of every chance we get and make the most of everything. The drive and determination come from the years we were in a band that didn't work. It takes a long time to hone your craft as a songwriter and as a musician.

The *NME* tours have been really good for us. We've done three. We did the *NME Radar Tour* at the beginning of 2008, we did the *Shockwaves NME Awards Tour* this year and we just did a tour with them in America called *NME Presents*. They're great tours to be on. They can be a really good springboard for a band. When you have their support, it really filters down to everyone in the world.



It's like lighting a fuse. They're an important magazine and we've been very lucky to have their support.

The success of the *NME* in the US is through their website, so they decided to run a tour there. It was a really good thing to do for us, it was great to be touring with Friendly Fires who are a band on a similar level to us in the US. There were 12 people sharing the tour bus. We started the tour at SXSW and were on the road for about 4 weeks, and at the end of the tour we played Coachella. We definitely felt that we'd come a long way since the beginning of the tour.

Apart from losing my voice for five or six days, overall it ran smoothly. It was a wonderful tour, we formed very solid friendships with Friendly Fires. They're lovely guys and we had such a nice time with them. To finish at Coachella was beautiful. It was such an 'other-worldly' place with such wonderful weather. We had a really good stay there, it was good fun. Touring America on a bus was incredible, you could just see such a good cross-section of the country. It's the best way to see America.

It's definitely been a big eye-opener. I had travelled before I was in the band but not any more than anyone else has. I had a pretty normal childhood. Going to Japan for the first time was like stepping on to another planet or stepping into the future. It was very unreal to me, amazing.

The music industry is very fickle. When things go wrong and the right people don't get behind a band, they will very quickly get dropped from their record company, publishers. It's a very sad thing. I've seen some fantastic bands get dropped well before they can blossom.

Our main ambition from day one, when we first started playing together, was to write and record an album and release it. We obviously realised that very early on. Our aim now is to play to as many people as possible and to improve as a live band. More long-term, it's to have the opportunity to do this for a few years to come and to write and record a few more albums and to continue to tour the world.

We have some amazing festivals to come. We're hoping to build on the success we've had since the beginning of the year. I'm yet to be disappointed by anything that's happened to us. It's been such a wonderful experience. It's definitely lived up to my expectations. We're grateful to have this opportunity and grateful to the people who work for us and with us for helping to make us as successful as we are. It's been an incredible year."

WHITE LIES FRONTMAN HARRY McVEIGH  
ON SIX MUSIC INDUSTRY MYTHS  
– ONLY ONE IS TRUE!



## THE RECORD DEAL IS THE ANSWER

A common myth is that, once you sign a record deal, it's all very easy, very happy-go-lucky, you're going to have a really easy life after that. In fact, that's when the hard work begins. You have to think about recording an album and promoting it. That's something we weren't fully prepared for at the very beginning, but we adjusted to it quite quickly.

## THE MUSIC INDUSTRY IS FULL OF 'SUITS'

Another myth is that everyone who works in the music industry higher up, people who run labels, are all businessmen who wear suits and don't really care about the music, just worry about the profit margins. We were very pleasantly surprised to discover there are people like Jim Chancellor, our A&R man at Fiction, and various other people in the industry, who are real music-lovers.

## SUPPORT BANDS DON'T GET A SOUNDCHECK

Unfortunately, it's true that support bands don't always get soundchecks. We've been very lucky. We've toured with bands we've got along with very well like Snow Patrol and we've usually had a soundcheck. But if something goes wrong, then the headliner obviously takes priority. On many occasions, we haven't had a soundcheck or we've had a very short one, which is fine because we've got a fantastic group of people working with us. When that happens, our crew, our sound guy and our tour manager work very hard to make sure that we're fully prepared for the show.

## TOURING IS GLAMOROUS

There is that preconception that a touring band has a glamorous lifestyle. In actual fact, it's more often the A&R men and the people who work in the music industry who have the more outrageous rock and roll behaviour. As a touring band, you have to remain very clear-headed and focused in order to fulfil your tasks, because it is very, very hard work.

## IT'S EXCESS ALL AREAS

We do drink, though Charles Cave, our bassist, and me gave up drinking for Lent this year, even though we're not religious. It was just a decision. When you're touring, it's very easy to have a drink every night. It was good to take a break. There are certainly no drugs in our band. It's something we've individually decided not to do. It clouds your judgement on certain things. And you wouldn't be able to function so well as a band if drugs were involved and you were on the road. We're down the road normal guys, we're not crazy rock and rollers. We don't get pissed every night. We work hard.



## THE TOUR MANAGER WILL SORT IT OUT

Our tour manager does take care of us well, but he doesn't do everything for us. He does that on purpose because he wants us to learn a few things about life. Otherwise we'd become entirely dependent on him and that's not something that we want and that's certainly not something he wants. We have to make our own way on a lot of things, which is good for us.

## WHITE LIES FRONTMAN HARRY McVEIGH ON FIVE THINGS HE WISHES HE'D KNOWN WHEN HE STARTED

### YOU GET HOMESICK

I wish I'd known how long I would be away from home for. That is one of the hardest things about being a touring musician, the time spent away from home. We just got back after spending about five and a half weeks away, which is really tough actually. We loved it, we loved playing the shows, that's what makes it all worth it. Playing live is the best thing about being in the band, it's a wonderful experience. Performing is something I'd recommend to anyone. But being away from home is tough.

### IT'S HARD WORK

It's a lot of hard work, it's not all rock and roll lifestyle and parties. Nothing can really prepare you for being in a band. It's the same as doing any job or making any career choice. You learn the most in the first year that you do it.

### FOREIGN LANGUAGES ARE USEFUL

I was so bad at learning languages at school. Now we're trying to learn. We have these fantastic audio books which teach us how to speak various languages. You can learn the basics in a couple of days on some of the longer plane journeys. I want to learn a little bit of Japanese – it's so alien to me I'd love to be able to speak that language. Certainly a little bit of French and

German. I think it's politeness to be able to talk to people in their language. I always feel I'm being a little rude if I'm not making an effort to do that.

### FANS EXPECT A LOT

Fans can be intense. I won't go into it, but it's very dark and also probably quite private to them. We've certainly experienced a fair bit of that. It's very flattering and very complimentary but sometimes you do almost feel like saying 'I'm not a therapist, I can't really help you with your problems. I'm not at all trained to do this, I'm just a musician and that's just a song we sing and that's just the subject which we choose to write about. I don't really know much about how to help



you'. It's a very strange thing indeed. It's a testament to the power of the music. Obviously people connect emotionally with the songs, the music, the lyrics, and they think that the people who wrote that music have the answers whereas in fact we probably don't.

#### ROYALTIES ARE THE ICING ON THE CAKE

It's a wonderful thing when you receive your PRS statement because you feel like you're getting money for nothing. You've done the hard work writing and recording the songs. You don't have to go and physically play the songs on the radio. When you have a record that's played a lot, you get a little bit of money, which is very nice actually. The amounts do surprise me.