

CHARLIE CUNNINGHAM

BIOGRAPHY 2019

Charlie Cunningham may not intentionally have meant the title track of his new album 'Permanent Way' to resemble a manifesto for personal and creative freedom, but the words 'You can do what you want / But I'm making my own way in,' speaks volumes for the way he's gone about his music.

Charlie has relentlessly pursued his art at the expense of more potentially stable vocations, including moving to the flamenco stronghold of southern Spain for over two years. Once back in Britain, a string of EPs quickly won over support from mainstream radio and Spotify, before the increasingly dexterous instrumental and songwriting craft behind his 2017 album debut *Lines* illuminated – rather than contained – the man's intimate, raw, haunting sound, etched by Charlie's gorgeously expressive vocal and the dramatic thrum of his nylon-stringed guitar.

Now comes the stunning *Permanent Way*, his first album on Infectious/BMG, which laughs in the face of 'difficult second album' syndrome and 'acoustic-singer-songwriter' imagery with boosted colours and dynamics, while retaining the essence of the man's achingly personable appeal.

"It was important for *Lines* to be kept simple," Charlie explains. "It was my first album and I wanted the songs to be able to stand up, without too many bells and whistles. I did also want to eventually make an album like *Permanent Way* though, and the relative success of *Lines* meant that I could". Given its subtle synth enhancements, *Lines* wasn't simply one man and his guitar, though Charlie made the album alone, aided by producer Duncan Tootill.

Permanent Way is more of a team effort: Tootill returns to co-produce (while adding piano and synth) but the album was predominantly put together alongside producer/engineer Sam Scott (who also adds brass and keyboards and percussion). Friends Ben Daniel (bass, guitar, backing vocals), Will Gates (drums) and Liam Hutton (drums) complete the majority of the backing, while Daniel Thorne (*Erased Tapes*) orchestrated 'Monster' and 'Stuck' (played by Immix Ensemble).

Charlie also flew to LA for a session with producer Rodaidh McDonald (*The XX*, King Krule), adding 'Don't Go Far', 'Bite' and 'Force of Habit' to the finished record. Says Charlie, "I had a good thing going with Duncan, so it made sense to try and continue where we left off, plus he is a great synth player and he really brings a lot to the table on the electronic side of things. Rodaidh has a really unique ear for sonics and pushed me to move out of my comfort zone, definitely for the better. Sam and I then set about pulling it all together and making it cohesive".

The fact a bigger label and 'name' producer hasn't affected Charlie's sound and vision shows he'd continued to make his own way in. Similarly, over 130m Spotify hits has been reached with little social-media interaction or profile-raising appearances in his promo videos. "I'm quite a private person outside of performing" he admits. "There is some autobiographical stuff in the lyrics, but it flits in and out quite a lot; it's much more about people generally and their interactions."

Permanent Way documents life's uncertainties: the need for intimacy and love, but also space and independence. In 'Don't Go Far', the narrator is conflicted, telling someone, 'I don't want to know, I suppose, where you are, but don't go far' What Charlie calls "the slightly ominous guitar line" of 'Sink In' inspired a tale of ambiguous persuasion. The genesis of 'Headlights' was the downbeat 'You don't even enter my thoughts'.

Sometimes bleakness descends. 'Monster' details how people "aren't connecting in the same way anymore and are easily distracted". The classic production style of artists like Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday inspired the "dusty, smoky, lounge-y sound" of 'Hundred Times', a melancholic tale of resignation, 'Bite' feels darker, concerning addiction and enablers. 'Force of Habit', which builds to a gripping, insistent coda, is as Charlie says, "also looking at some of people's more complicated traits".

The exquisite, fragile album finale 'Stuck' is suitably, for the most part, just Charlie's voice and guitar, and perhaps a song that leans more towards the straight forwardly autobiographical, about, "being stuck in your head, or stuck for words."

Asked about his musical tastes... "They've always been pretty varied, I'm from a big family and everyone was always listening to different types of music, and I've continued to be a bit that way". Charlie cites The Beatles as a strong influence (aged 11, he saw a documentary, then asked for their Anthology box set for Christmas). A neighbour gave him his first guitar, aged 13. Radiohead's Ok Computer came out the same year; "that made a big impact". As he kept learning, his tastes evolved, from the brutal sounds of Converge and Botch to hardcore icons Fugazi to the more expansive Mogwai, and the ambience of Brian Eno and early Aphex twin. Whilst continuing to be drawn to the acoustic singer-songwriter styles of artists like John Martyn, Nick Drake and Paul Simon.

While Charlie's Spanish sojourn in his late twenties is well documented, far less known is his adolescent epilepsy and dyslexia, or his expulsion from high school. "Reading music was impossibly hard", yet he gained a music degree. To push himself harder, and further, he moved to Seville, initially for two months. "I ended up staying for two and a half years. Then, when I got home to England, I managed to get some regular work, playing guitar in bars and pubs around the place, making some kind of living through music. That's when I picked up songwriting again."

2014's debut EP Outside Things was enough to have Radio 1 DJ Zane Lowe set up a BBC Introducing slot for Charlie. Following a second EP, Breather (2015), the Swedish label Dumont Dumont released Charlie's third EP, Heights (2016) and then Lines (2017). Now comes Permanent Way on Infectious/BMG. Alone or accompanied, accentuating the guitar, the songs and the arrangements, the only permanent way for Charlie seems to be forward. Making his own way in.

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