

If any other band tried to sing to you in binary code, it probably wouldn't work. Somehow, Alt-J is the exception. Since they crashed into our consciousness with 2012's award-winning *An Awesome Wave*, Alt-J has thrived by being something that, on paper, defies easy explanation.

A trio of polite Englishmen who met at art school — vocalist and guitarist Joe Newman, keyboardist and vocalist Gus Unger-Hamilton and drummer Thom Green — Alt-J's bold music with folk roots is a disaster for genre labeling: Is it art rock? indie pop? alt-prog? trip hop? folktronica? It hardly matters. Not fitting into a box is one of Alt-J's greatest strengths, best highlighted by its third album, *Relaxer*.

Relaxer is still steeped in literary allusions and folk traditions mixed with playful, left-field twists, but it packs a compact punch unlike the band's previous offerings. Despite a runtime just shy of 40 minutes, they've managed to craft and confident album that moves and breathes, in no real hurry — most tracks clock in at over five minutes.

"It's less of a journey and more of an offering of eight tracks that are very different from each other," Unger-Hamilton says. "It's a bit more like a computer game, where you can walk around from world to world or zone to zone and immerse yourself in them but not necessarily be on a linear journey."

It's the opposite of a concept album. From its ambient folk opener '3WW,' *Relaxer* glides into the album's best earworm, the radio-ready 'In Cold Blood,' which feels like the spiritual successor to 'Left Hand Free,' the smash from their second album, *This Is All Yours*. Together, they're a dazzling start.

From there, the trio dials it back for the folk staple 'House of the Rising Sun,' a well-worn cautionary tale of life gone wrong in New Orleans, covered most famously by The Animals but tackled by everyone from Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly to Bob Dylan, Dolly Parton and Nina Simone. Alt-J adds original lyrics, shifting the focus to the narrator's alcoholic father, and fills out the arrangement with 20 classical guitarists playing simultaneously.

Onward, to the album's biggest curveball, 'Hit Me Like That Snare,' a punk-inspired track that sees the band's frontman adopting a saucy, drunken swagger that's more Joe Strummer than Joe Newman, but with more lyrics in Japanese.

And that's just Side A. The second half remains unpredictable, giving us familiar hints of electronica and trip-hop, a growing cinematic quality through strings and brass, and finally something we're going to call hymn-rock on 'Pleader,' which features vocals from the Cambridgeshire boys' choir to which Unger-Hamilton belonged when he "was a wee lad."

"On our third album, now we feel more than ever like we have a pretty good idea who we are as a band, and what we want to achieve, and what we're able to

ALT-J

Photographer: Mads Perch
Writer: Sonya Singh

achieve," Unger-Hamilton says. "The earlier albums were a bit more like ping our toes into different waters saying, 'Could we be this band?' Now we know much more that we many different bands. We are not [one] band, and we embrace that."

Alt-J's self-awareness has grown, but part of their success stems from confidence that was always there. They've never felt the need to bend their music to fit any particular genre or scene, Unger-Hamilton explains. When *An Awesome Wave* took home the Mercury Prize, the pressure to measure up to their own debut didn't change how they approached their sophomore album.

That second record, *This Is All Yours*, catapulted to No. 1 on the UK's Official Albums Chart, garnered a Grammy nom and soon Alt-J was selling out Madison Square Garden and headlining major American music festivals.

"It's difficult because when you have a big success like that first album, you want to prove to people that you're not a

flash in the pan," he says. "I think we achieved that with the second album, and now we've probably made our bravest album yet. If that puts people off, fair enough. But we'll go to our graves knowing we never compromised what we were trying to do as musicians and artists. That's a really great feeling."

Relaxer first peeked into the world this past March, when the band posted an audio clip captioned "00110011 01110111 01110111," which is binary code for '3WW,' *Relaxer*'s opening track. Computer speak appears again as a lyric on 'In Cold Blood.' It was a fun teaser for fans accustomed to such things from a cerebral band. After all, even their name is a keyboard shortcut for a delta (Δ), which will ring a bell from high school chemistry as the Greek letter that signifies change.

On the other hand, several of their videos call to mind a different nature: 'Breezblocks' shows a murder in reverse, and the protagonist in 'Hunger of the Pine' takes half a dozen arrows to the chest and one straight through the jugular.

There are dark themes on *Relaxer*, too, from naming a single after Truman Capote's true crime classic *In Cold Blood* to the album's soft standout 'Last Year,' which tells the story of a man's spiral into depression and eventual suicide. As Newman's part ends, we're lifted by the crystalline voice of Marika Hackman as her character sings at the man's funeral.

Then there's the ominous album cover — an image of a bloodied body on train tracks, though tamed by 1998 computer graphics: It's a screen-grab from the original PlayStation game *LSD: Dream Emulator*. The band loved how it summed up *Relaxer* — "this big sandbox, a landscape, a world you could wander around and find different unsettling but intriguing spaces within."

"Like most people, we [also] love violent films and computer games," Unger-Hamilton admits. "We've never felt the need to pick one or the other. If we as people are capable of smashing out two hours playing *Grand Theft Auto* and also really appreciating poetry, then why shouldn't everyone be like that?"

When it's framed that way, their duality doesn't seem so puzzling. No one is merely one thing, and maybe Alt-J's uncompromising work helps us reconcile seemingly incongruent facets of ourselves. Inventive music aside, perhaps that's partly why audiences with dissimilar tastes have found common ground in Alt-J.

"We're pleased — and slightly bemused, but pleased — that there seems to be a large appetite for [our music]. I think we'd be doing this even if we didn't have an audience, but we do, and that's amazing. And here I am talking to you in America about it, which is kind of mind-blowing," he says. "Ultimately, we give birth and we let the child develop on its own. We're very hands-off parents."

Thrilled by experimentation and unburdened by expectation, Alt-J is still a band of three college friends who love writing and playing songs in a world of their own creation, but they'll gladly welcome you into that world — even if you have to learn a bit of binary code to understand it.