

PARSONSFIELD - BLOOMING THROUGH THE BLACK

May 6, 2015: Day One in the abandoned axe factory hadn't gone as planned, so today is the first time the five members of Parsonsfield will actually get to make music here. They'd been looking forward to converting this cavernous industrial space on the banks of the Farmington River in Collinsville, CT, ever since singer/banjo player Chris Freeman, who grew up nearby, brought it to their attention. The idea of recording in such a reverberant, reactive space held great appeal after the past six months spent in Canada exclusively performing their critically acclaimed original songs for 'The Heart Of Robin Hood,' a musical that required them to wear in-ear monitors for eight shows a week in theaters designed to be sonically dead.

They've got their amps and PA plugged in now, and there's a faint layer of sawdust on top of all the gear. It's nothing compared to yesterday, when they opened the doors for the first time and discovered sawdust an inch thick coating every imaginable surface. It was so bad they had to purchase respirators and devote the entire day to sweeping and vacuuming, trying to outwit the neighbor's overzealous guard dog every time they came and went from the building. The whole process left so much dust still floating in the air that every time they take a break, another layer settles back down to earth, but at least they can comfortably breathe now.

Above them, a cyclist crosses the rickety bridge over the river, making a distinctive clatter as the wheels hit a particularly loose plank. It's time to begin 'Blooming Through The Black.'

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Though they call western Massachusetts home, Parsonsfield draws their name from the rural Maine town that's home to the Great North Sound Society, the farmhouse-turned-recording-studio of Josh Ritter keyboardist/producer Sam Kassirer. It was there that they cut their outstanding debut, 'Poor Old Shine,' which established them as a roots force to be reckoned with. Folk Alley dubbed their songs "the most jubilant and danceable indie roots music this side of the Carolinas." Their rowdy live performances only upped the ante, with The Bluegrass Situation falling for their "fun and frenzy" and No Depression raving that they'll "give you rich five-part harmonies one minute, sound like bluegrass on steroids the next, and then rock you over the head with unbearably cool and raucous Celtic rhythms."

It was only natural, then, that they called on Kassirer once again for their follow-up, 'Blooming Through The Black,' enlisting his engineering and production ingenuity to help convert the axe factory into a temporary recording studio. In addition to placing microphones on each instrument, Kassirer set up additional mics throughout the factory just to capture the feel of the enormous space, which itself became another instrument in the band's already-impressive repertoire.

Parsonsfield spent nearly six months writing and rehearsing in the factory, discovering that song ideas that had begun life in Canada radically transformed in their new home. The space demanded understatement and subtlety to balance out the band's exuberance and energy, and by the time they were ready to hit record, they were sitting on a collection chock full of the most infectious, emotionally mature songs of their career.

'Blooming Through The Black' opens with 'Stronger,' a slow-burner that begins as an acoustic folk number and builds to an electrified tumult. It's a showcase for their instrumental prowess, lyrical chops, and unbridled passion, and it's just the start. The title track—inspired by the sight of the first flowers growing back in the forest fire-charred landscape of Hell Canyon, South Dakota—finds Freeman blending punk energy with earnest sincerity in his delivery, while "Across Your Mind" rides a feel-good groove driven by bassist Harrison Goodale and drummer Erik Hischman, and "Water Through A Mill" ebbs and flows like a solemn hymn on top of Max Shakun's meditative pump organ.

As the band explored the quirks and eccentricities of the factory, unexpected sounds and moments sometimes became permanent fixtures of the songs, but a particularly happy accident occurred outside the studio entirely, when Shakun called mandolin player Antonio Alcorn for help setting up his new record player. Upon dropping the needle somewhere in the middle of a copy of 'Poor Old Shine,' they discovered it was spinning backwards, but the melody coming out of the speakers was perhaps even more of an infectious earworm than it was when played forward. They brought the new riff to the rest of the band, where it morphed into "The Ties That Bind Us," a stand-out foot-stomper and a highlight of their live show.

Catch Parsonsfield onstage any night and the band's joy is palpable. They trade instruments, share microphones, and shoot each other big grins. They sing in tight multi-part harmonies, their voices blending like they've been doing this together all their lives. That's because Parsonsfield is a family band, not by birth but by choice. And with an album this thrilling, it's only a matter of time before you share their same enthusiasm.

Listen closely at the top of "Don't Get Excited" and you'll hear the clatter of a cyclist crossing the rickety bridge over the river. That's the sound of Parsonsfield inviting you into the axe factory. It's time to begin 'Blooming Through The Black.' Good luck not getting excited.