There are few contemporary bands who can do musical reinvention quite as consistently as Black Country, New Road. From their Mercury Music Prize-nominated debut *For the First Time*, which touched upon everything from jazz to post-rock via klezmer music, to the art-rock meets chamber pop follow up *Ants From Up There* (both top 5 charting albums). Then when singer Isaac Wood amicably left shortly after, they wrote an entire set of new songs to tour which ended up on *Live at Bush Hall*, an album The Guardian claimed was a “magical resurgence” in a triumphant five-star review. Now, on studio album three, the band are once again building from the ground up in yet another miraculous musical transformation.

“*Bush Hall* was a really fun project to find our feet in,” says Charlie Wayne. “But we toured it to death and we were done with those songs. This album is a new statement of intent for us as a six-piece.” The band have now settled into a new shape in which vocal duties – and most of the songwriting – is split between Tyler Hyde, Georgia Ellery, and May Kershaw.“It created a real through line for the album, having three girls singing,"says Ellery. "It's definitely very different to Ants From Up There, because of the female perspective - and the music we've made also compliments that."

The band’s ability to respond to changing circumstances is not only down to their close-knit friendship but due to their talent, adaptability and long-standing relationship together as musicians. A mix of classically trained and self-taught, the multi-instrumentalists gathered steam as a band in the late 2010s, regularly playing The Windmill in Brixton alongside friends and peers such as Squid and Black Midi, and soon found themselves being labelled "the best band in the world" by The Quietus.

Despite moving swiftly on after each record, and never having conventionally toured in support of a studio album, the band’s fervent following has only grown and grown regardless. By the time they found themselves in front of an ecstatic audience to record their live album, they were singing songs that reflected on the profound friendship that had steered them this far through an unpredictable journey, as they hollered in unison: “look at what we did together / BC,NR, friends forever!”

That deep-rooted attachment and connection are the foundations of their latest. And it’s also a hugely ambitious and singular record, which is glisteningly produced by James Ford (Fontaines D.C., Arctic Monkeys, Depeche Mode, Blur). “It's pretty big and bold,” says Wayne. “There's a lot of very full and rich creative decisions that went into it. Making this we were considering every single option and really opening up every possibility as we figured out how to operate in a totally different framework.”

It’s a framework that includes everything from folk to prog via baroque pop and touches of alt rock – with nods to a variety of artists such as Joanna Newsom, Randy Newman, Fiona Apple and Janis Ian – yet all the while retaining that unmistakably unique sound that only this combination of musicians can come up with. Although hugely varied and expansive, the album also feels deeply cohesive and focused, as it takes three distinct voices and styles and seamlessly intersperses them into a new collective sound. “At the beginning, it was very random,” says Hyde. “We went in a few different directions just to see what we enjoyed and what happened but you soon realise how to chisel a certain sound or direction to sound cohesive.”

However, while the band may have unconsciously been tapping into older reference points, everything about the album feels, both musically and lyrically, undeniably contemporary and fresh. The opening ‘Besties’ sets the tone for an album that is as accessible and melodic as it is nuanced and progressive. It’s a rousing yet delicate piece of chamber folk pop that is an ode to a particular kind of friendship. “It’s about creative flow, the importance of, and commitment to, female friendships in your twenties,” says Ellery. Musically, it’s something of a partner song, “a response” to following track ‘The Big Spin’ which was written by Kershaw and, explains Ellery, “was a song that just felt really easy going and so I kind of just ran with that same feeling.”

With Hyde, Ellery, and Kershaw bringing individual songs to rehearsal sessions, what soon began to take shape was a kind of domino effect, with each person feeling inspired by one another’s songs and that in turn shaping their own. And so what quickly occurred was these three individual and unique talents, with distinct vocal styles, began to slowly coalesce to form a kind of intuitive songwriting relationship. “We play the songs through a lot,” explains Kershaw. “So after a rehearsal the songs would just be going around and around in my head. And things that are spinning around up there will come out in my songwriting, whether it's conscious or not.” Hyde echoes this. “They're just really good songs that get stuck in your head,” she says. “When I wrote ‘Happy Birthday’ I had Georgia’s song ‘Besties’ in my head while I was writing it. And therefore, the structure of it is heavily influenced by it.”

‘Happy Birthday’ being inspired by ‘Besties’ is a perfect example of how songs on the album are connected in spirit and tone but still feel like very standalone pieces of work. The former slowly builds over sprightly piano keys and laid-back guitar, with Hyde lyrically tapping into the frustrations of generational differences with younger people and their need to wake up from their own self-absorption, before it creeps into something quietly yet potently euphoric. Elsewhere there’s equally impressive range: ‘Two Horses’ grows from something that has an almost Americana meets dream pop feel into a propulsive and hypnotic folk-jazz-prog groove. ‘Nancy Tries to Take the Night’ has a Steve Reich-esque loop pulsing through it, while ‘Mary’ is a stripped back and tender track that beautifully and powerfully captures the three singers joining forces.

However, while this is a record teeming with new ideas, instruments, voices and sounds, it works because the group also understands the importance of restraint. “We kept talking about The Band all the time,” says Hyde of the 1960s folk-rock outfit. “We haven't made an album that sounds anything like them but I'm so grateful to them because they helped us play slower. We've tried to groove as much as possible on this album, to really sit back and make a conscious effort to not rush anything.” You can hear this in the slower approach to playing in parts too, as Luke Mark explains. “I'm trying to be a more mature musician and not be too excitable,” he says. “To try and make the song that someone brings in better, and not more about me. So that meant playing a lot more acoustic guitar to best serve the needs of the song.”

Though, as Evans points out, when you have a group of musicians as talented as this bunch, even if you are stepping into bold new terrain and experimenting, there’s always going to be an inescapable identity to what they do. “Our musicianship is distinctive and characteristic,” he says. “So, no matter what the source material is, the way that we play with each other means it’s going to have a bit of a stamp on it. It is an individual sound.”

This feeling of individualism sprouting into collective creativity is one that ultimately underpins the album. Evans recalls it being a beautiful thing to watch unfold and seeing the album find its stride and purpose. “The three of them just started to take more and more inspiration from each other's writing,” he says. “And you could see their confidence grow.” Kershaw recalls that on the band’s debut album she “couldn't even sing the backing vocals in front of everyone because it was too much.” And Mark recalls seeing a shift take place as faith and conviction grew. “The craft of the songwriting was so strong that it allowed their confidence as singers to blossom too,” he says. “It’s been cool to see not only the confidence grow but also the bravery to come up with new artistic ideas in such interesting ways.”

*Forever Howlong* is an album that once again proves no records of theirs will ever sound the same, while also cementing the fact that there’s nobody coming even remotely close to making music that sounds like BC,NR right now.