

## **Puma Blue – *Holy Waters***

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“I’ve been trying to make peace with death,” smiles Jacob Allen, the singer-songwriter, producer and poet better known as Puma Blue, bashfully aware of the abstract stateliness his avowal holds. “It’s horrible and it’s painful. I’d never say that it isn’t. Yet at the same time, the process of it all can be beautiful.” Death nestles like a sweet creature at the heart of *Holy Waters*, the highly anticipated follow-up to 2021’s *In Praise of Shadows*, set for release this Autumn via Blue Flowers. It’s less a morbid study in mortality, more a chronicle of the graciousness within each repeated cycle of life, death and rebirth, arriving eventually at a gentle affirmation to himself, to the listener, at the album’s close, to keep going, “*don’t let the dark take you whole*”. It’s the hope-tinged bleakness that gets you.

A substantial leap in Jacob’s artistry; extraordinary multitudes of hurt and relief are journeyed in his writing, navigating the spaces between grief and elation, and the strange semblances between solitude and community. Across its eleven tracks, his voice is a gossamer fabric delighting in the brightest language as he retraces every path walked in the harshest years of his life with a startling sincerity, looking each face of grief in the bloodshot eye. For the most part, he accepts it.

Recorded with his live band over the course of two visits to Eastbourne’s Echo Zoo Studios, *Holy Waters* also marks a sharp departure from the solo bedroom productions of early EP releases, 2017’s ‘Swum Baby’ and 2018’s ‘Blood Loss’, an isolated approach that was later enforced upon his debut album during lockdown. Writing his decade-long struggle with insomnia into an album of uncannily nocturnal music felt like a selfless act at times, hazily allowing others to drift through sleep states at his expense – Puma Blue, the unwavering jukebox, wide awake. “I look back at [In Praise of Shadows] and feel grateful that I managed to express what I was going through”, he says reflectively, his choice of the singular pronoun feeling all the more significant as he continues, “but this time, when I sit down and listen to a tune, I get more excited because it’s what my friends were doing, from their brains in that moment and we managed to record it.”

Collaboration has been creeping into Jacob’s other work recently, too, fresh from production and writing credits on Loyle Carner’s latest album *Hugo*, alongside an impressive list of co-writes with Biig Piig, Mahalia, and Lava La Rue among others. The dopamine rush flushes into *Holy Waters*, confidence transposed – he grins, a liberated look: “It makes me proud; instead of that awkward thing of admiring your own reflection, or being embarrassed by your own reflection, the music has also become a reflection of the people I love.”

Along with mix engineer Sam Petts-Davies (The Smile, Warpaint), there was an expression they kept returning to whilst putting the finishing touches to *Holy Waters*; every element should sound like the loudest element. A joy permeates each sonic corner as a result, the studio techniques more analogue and experimental than his previous work, but sounding fuller, richer, killing what ego was left in Puma Blue and paying their band-centric debts proudly. Inspired still by luminaries from Jeff Buckley to Björk, more important to *Holy Waters* was Portishead's inexplicable marriage of a live band and production, and the improvisational work of Can and Hendrix. This is an album that can be devoured late at night with headphones as much as it can be blasted on the open road. The eureka moment came when watching *The Beatles: Get Back*, realising they weren't stoically crafting masterpieces as he'd once imagined. "They were just a group of dysfunctional friends, who were really good at seeing through an idea," he laughs.

Featuring Harvey Grant on saxophone, keys and co-production, Cameron Dawson on bass, Ellis Dupuy on drums and Luke Bower on guitar, there's a distinct irony that an album reckoning with an all-encompassing loneliness was built upon such strong foundations of friendship. Throughout the band's time in Eastbourne they were a perfect family: they would wake up together, cook for each other, swim in the bracing sea at lunchtimes when creative walls were hit and end most evenings at the pub near the studio together. It's a togetherness that hurricanes around the first single 'Hounds', mutating Jacob's Buckley-esque croon – "*I'll find myself alone again*" – into an unfurling post-rock brawl, where guitar flurries lock in and out of machismo bass, and brass bluster daggers into the night like a Kraut-kissed Pink Floyd on their psychedelic comedown. It's a musical friendship that gently teases Allen's anxieties and embraces his sadness; on the aching 'Mirage', a heart-wrenching ode to the death of a schoolfriend, guitars and synths adherently crescendo to insulate his ending wails. Good friends are there when you need them.

The punctuating, mumbled two-minute 'Epitaph' at the album's centre is another stand-out, written about the death of his grandmother shortly before the Covid pandemic was announced to the world. It wasn't until he visited where she was buried – dropped off outside Manchester by the band on their latest tour – that he knew how to write about her, preserving her memory in elegiac minutiae, small bites of birthday cake and crayon drawings. "I had this incredibly spiritual experience where I just stood in the church grounds and spoke with my grandparents," he explains. "There was this sense of a veil between life and death... I didn't feel like they were actually there, or their ghosts, but I felt like they could hear what I was saying. When I left, the song came flooding in. I wasn't trying to tackle losing someone as a subject, it just became a series of memories. Previously I would've overthought it – no one knows my grandma, a song about those specific things won't reach anyone – but I think, with this, I just started to make music for myself again. And if it means something to me, it's probably going to mean something to someone else."

The following song 'Gates (Wait For Me)' is even more affecting – an imagined response to 'Epitaph' from Allen's grandfather. Two lines are stuck on repeat across the track's six minutes – once taciturn, now a soaring torch song – building through a sepulchral chorus of kick drums, swelling guitars and Hammond organ. For a writer so keenly taken by sprawling expressive poetry, 'Gates' is a rare a moment of brevity he can't move beyond, more fraught and bittersweet on each repetition: *"Wait for me, she said / How could I forget?"*

But among the sorrow, *Holy Waters* thrums with how Allen's life has persisted and triumphed between these grievous moments. In March 2021, he relocated from Hackney to be with his partner in Atlanta, swapping East London's chicken shops and hipster coffee spots for the tall woods and open plains of the suburban city. Three of the songs are dedicated to her in the sleeve notes, and each mention of her name causes an irrepressible smile to flash across his face. The title track is hers, too, and while *Holy Waters* might be his darkest work to date – even when compared to the moreish sadness flooding his breakthrough EPs *Swum Baby* (2017) and *Blood Loss* (2018) – it seems to find him in a better place than ever. It's as if death being the centrifuge to the album has made the beautiful moments that remain all the more beautiful; after all the sorrow and pain has passed, *Holy Waters* basks in them.