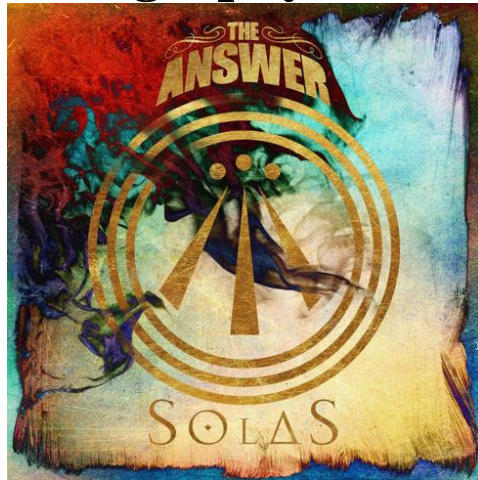


THE ANSWER

Biography 2016



SOLAS

“What the light don’t fill, the darkness kills”

Ten years, five albums and thousands of shows later, **The Answer** returned home from the last date of their 2015 US *Raise A Little Hell* tour, to a scene of utter emotional chaos. Staring into a financial and creative abyss, matters escalated further when main lyricist and lead singer Cormac Neeson disclosed that he wondered if he could bring himself to ever create anything again let alone pen a new record.

Neeson’s newly born son, Dabhog, had just arrived into the world three months premature and weighing a mere 11lb, 12 oz. He would spend the next four months in hospital fighting for his life. Born with multiple health issues and with the spectre of an open-heart operation on the horizon, Neeson and his wife were thrown into a nightmarish world of ventilators, blood transfusions and an enveloping fear of the unknown that lay ahead.

“I look back at that time of my life as a darkness I didn't know existed. It felt like all the lights in the world had been dimmed and weren't ever coming back up again. I emerged from that whole experience a different man,” explains Neeson.

Guitarist Paul Mahon recalls, *“It led to us all going our separate ways for a while, and while this happens after every tour this time it had a different tone. There were voices inside whispering, ‘would we ever play together again?’*

“The world was never going to look the same again,” continues Neeson, *“but at least I could start to think about stuff I hadn't thought about in a while. **Solas** arrived at just the right time for me because I felt strongly that I had a lot to say and to get off my chest.”*

Emotional refuge in creativity has driven some of the greatest muses since time immortal. Little wonder then that a new The Answer record arrived unexpectedly, borne from those moments of solitude, darkness and desperation. **Solas** was in no small part inspired by Neeson's journey from the edge of the abyss to a place where thankfully things no longer seem dark. A testament to personal resolve and dogged determination, he and his fellow band members who are also lifelong friends, strove to make good from bad; Solas from darkness. Their new voice needed a new sound and for this they turned inwards, to their homeland and Irish culture.

Solas, the Gaelic word for *Light*, is an aptly titled album that charts a new creative direction for the much-heralded British blues-rock act that burst onto the scene in 2006. It marks a significant shift into a world of darker cinematic rock, cultural Irish instrumentation, layered vocals and supporting chants in Gaelic and even Latin; all emotionally connected by a narrative and performance that sees Neeson stumble through an inhospitably bleak state of mind, channeling every creative sinew as he grapples for some form of escape.

"I wanted to put out there the journey that I've gone through over the last couple of years. I ended up in a dark, dark place for a while way beyond anything I'd ever had to experience before. Solas is an attempt to reflect that journey – the battle between light and darkness has something inherently Celtic about it. We all wanted to make a record that was a bit of a different statement to anything we've done to this point. We felt that the first place to start was our 'Irishness', our Irish culture both musically, culturally, politically – that great big weird melting pot that is Northern Ireland!"

Rather than step once again into a typical recording process, the band decided to bunker down in their home rehearsal room, convert it into a self contained recording set up, lock the doors and shut themselves away from the world. Guitarist Paul Mahon became the default engineer, arranger and guiding light that would help navigate the evolving creativity and newfound freedom, delivering updates and files from the bunker over to London based producers Andy Bradfield and Avril Mackintosh.

"We initially sat there looking blankly at each other," says Mahon. "It became apparent that we would have to approach writing in a completely different way; It was certainly disconcerting to move away from our traditional approach but we had to embrace a new process – working with loops, using sampled ideas, tweaking arrangements in Pro Tools, mandolins and acoustic guitars. We didn't want to limit ourselves and as well as exploring our Celtic roots, wanted to explore roots music in a broader sense. There may have been some conscious resistance at first but it felt we were being guided down a much more atmospheric, surreal and cinematic path and I think that is reflected in the finished result."

The album starts with the dark hypnotic drum beat of the opening title track 'Solas', a brooding rock anthem that builds to a climactic release with an explosive and almost operatic choral finale. This immediately sets the tone for what is to come and 'Beautiful World' continues that sonic landscape, bathed in a dark cinematic eeriness, crescendo-ing to an almost classic 70's retro progressive rock ending.

'Beautiful World' was co-written with former Massive Attack producer / composer, Neil Davidge and represents both beauty and horror all rolled into one deep dimensional production. Other tracks with similar arresting atmospheres include 'Thief Of Light', a rich Celtic choral arrangement that almost suspends time for the listener as Neeson struggles to find some silver lining and redemption. The Celtic tinged and inspired vocal arrangement sprung from bassist Micky Waters' love of Irish harmony, ingrained from a young age by his four older sisters who sang in an Irish folk choir.

Veering away from the darker mood, tracks such as 'In This Land' utilize the more traditional Irish arrangements of mandolin and acoustic guitars. Paying homage to Northern Ireland, the well documented 'troubles' and the many musical characters that have tread those shores, Neeson recalls a place where *"Heaven lies too close to hell"*. He tips his hat to Van, Rory and Alex with some very clever lyrical twists – *"Morrison got lucky; Gallaghers no sinner; The Hurricane can lose a fight, back in the den the mystery men gonna dig towards the light"*. A strong sense of survival and longing pervade his every word.

Underpinning this evolving musical shift is a band performing and supporting in perfect empathy. Paul Mahon sounds even more accomplished playing the mandolin and acoustic guitar as he does the electric Les Paul. This is not an album of straight ahead blues guitar solos but sees him experiment with sonic palettes, combining subtle moods, acoustic instrumentation with electric layers and for the greater part, his deliberate *under* playing supports the emotional context of the song and lyric, providing a new dimension to his talent as a guitarist of repute.

Drummer James Heatley, who co-penned and initiated the 'Solas' track, always finds the right groove no matter how subtle or intentionally aggressive and Micky Waters comes to the fore as a writer, bassist and vocalist in his own right providing cleverly created harmonic supporting lead vocal arrangements not to mention rich tonal bass parts.

The four members of The Answer shine throughout the album but it is the six-minute epic 'Battle Cry' that truly epitomises the old and new of The Answer. A luscious guitar riff starting on acoustic guitar develops in ever-evolving layers, joined by a pounding rhythm track and flavours of the Gaelic language as counterpoint vocals chant "*Seo An Lá A Thainig Mo Ghrá*", (*This Is The Day My Love Arrives*). Add a samba percussion band thundering over the climatic end with seamless production from the original *Rise* producers Andy Bradfield and Avril Mackintosh, and 'Battle Cry' becomes a liberating turning point in The Answer's sound.

The Irish musical influences abound throughout but are most apparent in tracks such as the afore-mentioned duo of 'Thief Of Light' and 'In This Land', along with the eerie atmospheres of 'Being Begotten'. However The Answer are still a fully-fledged rock band at heart and not afraid to step up a notch on the Richter scale with the tough and ballsy blues of 'Demon Driven Man', the Springsteen-meets-The Police punch of 'Left Me Standing' and the Americana-tinged rock duet 'Real Life Dreamers', featuring Irish songstress Fiona O Kane.

Solas is an honest and brave album that panders to no label, to no media framework and to no rules. It is dark, occasionally menacing and at certain moments, joyous and uplifting. It is a record that bears the scars and soul of four talented men from Northern Ireland; sometimes troubled but seeking creative liberation. No wonder then that the album artwork bears witness to this 2016 musical evolution, featuring as it does the ancient Celtic sign for 'illumination'.

The Answer have gone back to grass roots, regressed to their inner selves. Perhaps as a result of Neeson's personal circumstances; perhaps from the constant pressure to develop and survive; perhaps borne from a frustration that has empowered them to stick two fingers up to their rock 'n' roll straight jacket, they are now embarked upon a new and exciting journey having been through the darkest period in their relatively brief rock history.

What the light don't fill, the darkness kills.

SOLAS is released through Napalm Records on October 28th 2016.

