

THE USED – TOXIC POSITIVITY BIOGRAPHY  
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When Bert McCracken says that the songs that comprise *Toxic Positivity* are some of the most sincere he has ever written, you know he doesn't speak those words lightly.

For as long as he can remember, McCracken has used music as an outlet to lay bare his innermost thoughts and emotions. For 23 years, that writing has enabled The Used to deeply resonate with fans the world over. Exploding off the back of universally adored rock anthems such as 'The Taste Of Ink', 'Take It Away' and 'Pretty Handsome Awkward', the many millions of streams and record sales (including the platinum-certified *The Used* and *In Love And Death*) their career has yielded are one thing; the human connection formed between artist and audience is priceless, however. To that end alone, The Used can consider themselves four of the luckiest and richest men in music.

"Humans share such similar experiences and similar tragedies and everything in between," McCracken says of the intimate connection he has with people in all four corners of the globe. "I feel that if I'm writing honestly, and I'm writing from the heart, our fans will feel it.

"This record is quite tough of me to listen to," he adds, "because it's a reflection of times in my life that have been some of lowest ever."

If most albums are a document of a singular time, a place, and a feeling, then *Toxic Positivity* can lay claim to being a document of two, and the journey between them. When The Used entered the studio of longtime collaborator John Feldmann in the autumn of 2021, the result was 10 songs recorded across 10 days that would see McCracken, bassist Jephtha, drummer Dan Whitesides and guitarist Joey Bradford spilling sweat and blood for anything up to 14 hours at a time. Emerging from the eye of the Covid pandemic, and created in the shadow of a world that socially, economically and politically felt as if it were rupturing at the seams, the tracks were imbued with a negativity and despondency that spoke of experiences both shared and deeply personal, with McCracken suffering from a deep depression and addiction issues. Recent standalone singles 'Fuck You' ('I'm a shadow of the one I once knew', McCracken cries) and 'People Are Vomit' ('This future's fucked before it got started!') were, unsurprisingly given their titles and riotous anger, born of these sessions.

"Honestly, we thought we had a record right there," laughs Jepha today. But McCracken especially couldn't shake the nagging feeling that the story those songs were telling was not yet finished. "I felt it captured an emotion, but it was one without an ending," he says. Instead, he wanted his band's ninth full-length to carry a narrative that spoke of his own ever-changing headspace, as well as that of a society slowly emerging from pandemic hibernation and isolation.

McCracken doesn't fully accept *Toxic Positivity* as a 'concept record', in the traditional sense, but rather a "day-in-the-life journey of a depressed, anxiety-ridden person". "I think it flows cohesively like a concept record, but it ends up travelling here, there and everywhere, so it's a little scrambled," McCracken explains, "just like my days are a little scrambled. There's a lot of emphasis on 'me' and 'I', where a lot of the poetry of the past records is about 'him' and 'his' or 'they' and 'theirs'. It's a little more selfish and reflective in the literal sense on where I am at and where I was at.

"Waking up in a dark place has been such a huge part of my life in the past couple of years," McCracken continues. It's little wonder, then, that *Toxic Positivity* opens with the words "*I'm the worst I've ever been.*" "But for me, I tend to feel at my best at night time," he adds. "That's when I'm most at peace in feeling, 'Everything's going to be ok.'"

And so The Used gathered once more at the beginning of 2023 for another 10-day songwriting and recording sprint. The results fizzed with the same vigour and energy as those earlier songs, inspired by the collaborative process of a band that have never felt tighter. Yet they slowly began to take on a more hopeful lyrical turn, too, inspired by post-lockdown touring, and time spent reconnecting with their fans and each other.

"I wanted the record to end with something for people to grab onto," McCracken smiles, referencing the closing *Giving Up*, which opens with the admission "*Yesterday I woke up wanting to die*" and concludes with the repeated mantra of "*I'm not giving up on me*". "I want people to understand that, no matter how bad it gets, you don't have to give up. Everything always feels different no matter what. So what you're feeling right now you will not feel later on."

The collection arrives under a title created with its tongue firmly in its cheek, but one that comprehensively sums up its overarching emotion. "You see other people living their lives and smiling and it makes you hate everybody in the world who's doing okay," McCracken explains. "Even though you know, deep down that nobody's doing okay."

Absorbed front-to-back in its finished form, *Toxic Positivity* pulls from every facet of The Used's definitive sound. There's the buzzsaw riff of 'Pinky Swear (Save Me)'; the sweeping, arena-sized chorus of 'Headspace'; the earworm hooks of 'The Worst I've Ever Been'; and the underlying pop sensibilities of 'I Hate Everybody'. Hell, McCracken even digs deep for throwback screams on 'Dopamine'. Displaying a depth of sonic variety while never allowing an inch of slack into its taut cohesiveness, this is the past, present, and future of The Used represented in 11 tracks that combined barely break the half-hour mark.

"I feel we're a very personality orientated band," Jepha explains. "You can hear each of us in our instruments, and then Bert's voice ties us all together and anchors us. Our influences within the band vary so much, and this record is the perfect melting pot of everything we're all hearing. I see this record almost as a different branch of reality from where the band could have gone after (2009 album) *Artwork*."

"I think it has a lot of the love and the compassion and the viciousness of our first couple of records," adds McCracken with a mischievous grin.

Then, of course, there is the influence of producer John Feldmann. A near ubiquitous presence in the Used story – it was he who was instrumental in helping break the band, and who has manned the controls of every one of their records, bar 2017's *The Canyon* – both McCracken and Jepha speak to how their friend and collaborator simply 'gets' the band like no other. "He's helped us be better musicians and, frankly, better people," states Jepha. "He pulls from us things that no one else could. Everything he does comes from such a deep love of The Used." "And his studio has the most amazing coffee," laughs McCracken.

It would have been much needed for *Toxic Positivity's* marathon writing and recording sessions. Jepha laughs recalling the discomfort that working at a song-per-day speed instinctively felt to him, but both he and McCracken agree that the results it yielded were inimitably honest and inspired, necessity indeed proving the mother of invention. "The more you tinker with a song, the more you can lose sight of its true essence," is how Jepha sees it. "It felt like how it did when we were making our very first album," nods McCracken.

It exemplifies, too, the prolificacy of The Used. After 23 years and nine records, it speaks of the strength of the band's collective collaboration and also their innate, unquenchable thirst to create. "I think we have no choice but to write and write and write," says McCracken. "It has always just been in us, and we've had to get it out. I read a quote once that said you either work your entire lifetime on four great pieces, or you write thousands of pieces and become great that way. Everything that we feel, I think it always makes for a good song."

In that regard, McCracken is humble to a fault, for the simple fact that the songs within *Toxic Positivity* are far more than merely *good* songs. They mark the latest chapter in a truly great career. And, like those that have come before them, they will truly *matter*.