

NEWTON FAULKNER

Ten years since Newton Faulkner shot to stardom, he's back with album number six and an unwavering passion for playing

WORDS: DAN HOBSON

It's been a decade since Newton Faulkner became a household name with double-platinum debut album *Hand Built By Robots*. Now, four Top 10 albums later, Faulkner shows no sign of slowing down his creative quest, returning with his sixth studio album, *Hit The Ground Running*.

Written and recorded live at Faulkner's London home studio in the first six months of 2017, the album is his first departure from major labels – and it shows. All 14 tracks reflect Faulkner's new-found sense of freedom and sticks two fingers up to expectations.

"I'm really happy with how the album has turned out," Faulkner says. "Writing wise, it's in a really good space because I wasn't trying to do anything – I was literally doing what I do. As it was under my own label, there was no A&R saying 'Can you make it a bit poppier?', 'Can you make it a bit more beige?', 'Can you make that bit less weird?'"

At the time of speaking, Faulkner is playing a pop-up tour in Cornwall – as well as the

county's Boardmasters Festival – as a thank you to the fans who launched his career 10 years ago. "It was the stuff that happened down here which fuelled everything as I didn't really have the numbers to be taken seriously until then," he explains.

"One of the places I played back then was the Tap House, which was my longest ever gig. I played for three hours," Faulkner chuckles. "I did an hour-and-a-half set and at the end I was like 'This is literally everything I know' and people were like 'Nooooo, more' and stupidly I said I could go back to the beginning and do everything again and the crowd was like 'Yeeeeees'. So that's exactly what I did."

Hit The Ground Running is an album packed with musical variety. From the acoustic pop exuberance of opener 'Smoked Ice Cream' – which boasts a ludicrous five key changes – and 'This Kind Of Love', to the mellow tones of 'All She Needs' and ultra-soulful 'Finger Tips', Faulkner has certainly trodden new ground. For the first time, we hear him

reaching a whole new level vocally (he even dabbles with falsetto). There's still plenty of the fine percussive acoustic playing that he is renowned for and plenty of spectacular guitar work throughout, though.

"After 10 years of looking, I feel as though I've finally found my sound," Faulkner says proudly. "This album hits the sweet spot between the Tom Waits-y 'real music' side of me and my love of leftfield pop. There's certainly strangeness, but at the same time, there isn't one song I couldn't play on piano or acoustic guitar. For me, that's the holy grail."

"I feel like between the last two albums, I learned all of the stuff that I needed to make this record the way I did," he adds. "Studio Zoo is so stripped back that, to some people, it doesn't even sound finished. Guitar wise, it's the best record I've done because I was forced to push my playing as there was nothing else on it. That record is definitely the hardest to come back to – there are a few guitar parts on it that you have to practice every night to be able to do. That record pushed me to totally new places on the guitar."

"On the next record [*Human Love*] I went all-out experimenting with the computer, especially the epic drum sounds. Both albums sat in the same place vocally, though, neither pushed me too far. But on the new record, I decided to dig-in vocally and really push myself. I've done a lot of work on my voice over the years and I thought this record was the time to really push myself. It was about achieving a balance between the guitar and vocal."

While Faulkner's focus on the vocal is evident, it's his wizardly guitar work that he's best known for (apart from his fiery dreadlocks). But his voyage into six strings began, surprisingly, by playing bass in a Green Day covers band, aged 13. "My friend's started a band and I was like 'OK, so you're my only friend's and you've started a band with two





guitars and drums – what am I supposed to do?’ And they were like ‘Well, we haven’t got a bass player’ so I got a bass on Monday and we did our first gig that weekend,” chuckles Faulkner, who had dabbled on piano and drums prior to his foray into four strings.

Around 18, Faulkner began writing songs in another short-lived outfit before turning his attention to the acoustic guitar. “Green Day, Radiohead, and The Offspring were my early influences,” he remembers. “Alongside that was always my parents’ record collection: Crosby, Stills, & Nash; Neil Young; Joni Mitchell – that California folkie thing was always there.”

When he emerged in 2007, Faulkner was the fleet-fingered prince of acoustic pop after graduating from the Guildford Academy of Contemporary Music. “As I got specifically into acoustic guitar, that’s when things started changing quite a lot,” Faulkner remembers. “I got into Thomas Leeb, Eric Roche, Nick Harper and into technical guitar land.”

“I was taught by Eric Roche at the ACM,” he adds. “It wasn’t just his playing that inspired me so much; it was his whole attitude to music. Thomas Leeb had a massive influence on me too. Mike Dawes is killing at the moment. He is so good – disgustingly good. I love him to bits, but I hate him [laughs]. At some point I might take a break from writing songs to fully focus on guitars, see how far I can take it. I would love to do an instrumental album at some point.”

Alongside *Hit The Ground Running*, Faulkner is on a 32-date tour throughout the UK. After 10 years, does he still enjoy being on the road? “I absolutely love it,” he enthuses. “I do feel like I might have been made in some kind of test tube for this job. There’s nothing that I don’t love about it. I love being on tour; I sleep better on tour buses than I do anywhere else. I love the studio. There’s nothing I don’t like.” ■

***Hit The Ground Running* is out now.**
Info: www.newtonfaulkner.com

GEARBOX

Faulkner has seven instruments by luthier Nick Benjamin, whom he describes as an “absolute legend”. Here’s what Nick has to say...

“I first met Newton in 2003 when the late, great Eric Roche, his then tutor, sent him to see me about getting a guitar made. I had recently made an Orchestra Model sized guitar for Eric that was used for much of his *With These Hands* album and that instrument had been built for sustaining melodic pieces using cedar and Indian rosewood. Newton needed a performance guitar that would be great for percussion style (not that the style had a name then!) so I went for a bigger Jumbo Orchestra Model size but with a medium depth to make it comfortable on stage and well controlled in sound. We went for tough Sitka spruce that could take a beating and mahogany back and sides to give good loud percussive sounds and a quality sound with an internal mic. It worked well and I’ve been building that style for many people ever since, as a performance model, including Mike Dawes and Ryan Keen among others. That was the start of a continuing relationship over the past 14 years. Here are the guitars I’ve built for Newton...

1 #44 Jumbo Orchestra Model (JOM). Sitka spruce and mahogany

2 #72 JOM. Adirondack spruce with mahogany

3 #83 JOM Scoop. Lutz spruce with Palo Escrito rosewood

4 #96 Baritone Jumbo Scoop. Lutz spruce with Honduras rosewood

5 #123 JOM. Sitka spruce and mahogany

6 #155 Solid electric with midi triggers and bass output on bottom two strings

7 #164 Baritone Jumbo Scoop. Alpine spruce and sapwood cocobolo rosewood