

Matilda Mann

The cover photograph of Matilda Mann's debut album, *Roxwell*, is not entirely decipherable. Mann, a blurred figure on a quiet street, stands framed by a triptych of neon, light and shadow. The moment, a confluence of light and dark, embodies an essence of *Roxwell*: its interplay between darkness and hope, its blend of bitter and sweet. "I've found life to be this experience of feeling love and joy in a world that's messed up at the same time", Mann says. "Through all the ups and downs, I'd like to bring people some calm against the waves."

Huddled in the cold with her arms crossed for warmth, her stance is a mix of defiance and vulnerability. "I kind of look like a petulant child", she laughs, "but also like I'm trying my best to be confident even though I'm uncomfortable. I am right there in the forefront, with nothing to hide behind. That's how I feel a lot of the time – vulnerable, afraid to fail, but still standing tall."

Following a precocious few years in music, it feels fitting now for Mann's debut album to start at the beginning. Named *Roxwell* after the cherished street of her childhood home, the album is a tender ode to her formative years. An only child to loving parents, she soaked in the world from their house in West London, watching music documentaries with her father, writing songs in her bedroom and performing to her parents in the kitchen. "I'm very sentimental and wanted to pay tribute to that house, which is the closest thing to me. So much of my history is there", she notes. A gentle and resonant album, *Roxwell* exudes the warmth and care of that nurturing environment, propelling Mann into the world with a fundamental desire to connect with people.

"Being in love is a very big thing for me", says Mann. "Within this album, I've been in and out of love a few different times. Some of these songs are word-for-word records of what that was like." *Roxwell*, then, is a charmed exploration of love from a person eager to understand and feel its presence in her life, charting its course from infatuation to intimacy to dissolution.

Tell Me That I'm Wrong, a folky track woven with delicate guitar patterns, tells the story of two souls tentatively taking the leap into love. As Mann reflects: "Neither of us felt ready for a relationship, but we wanted to try anyway. We basically said to each other: 'If we do this, I'll love you for a really long time. Will you give me the green light to love you?'" Then, she navigates the aftermath of an all-consuming break-up on *Common Sense*. "I'd walk through Hammersmith and Shepherd's Bush, and in my mind all I could see was this person everywhere."

Despite being a songwriter so rooted in emotional investigation, Mann continues: "I actually think about things more logically, trying to map out

how a person would probably feel in different situations and why." *Roxwell* feels that way, the songs infused with careful empathy and detail, each moment carefully painted in all its intricacy.

"You hear so many opinions about what love should look and feel like, whether a love is good or bad", Mann reflects. "For a long time I struggled to listen to myself and understand how I actually felt." She wrestles with these internal conflicts, and eventually decides to end a relationship, on the album's quietly heartbreaking opener *At the End of the Day* and its cool, uptempo counterpart *Just Because*. "*At the end of the day / I'm too tired / To keep on holding your name*", she sings on the former, doing the hard thing with grace. She says of the track: "Here's me, signing out, setting us both free to let in the good things".

Roxwell is a sonic evolution for Mann, each song written across a tapestry of places, from her bedroom to the mountains of the Peak District, to the light-filled apartment in Archway where she and collaborator Jonah Summerfield often worked. Whilst tracks like *All That Was Said* ground the album in her beloved indie folk, *Roxwell* also explores new musical territories, like the sultry pop hooks on *Meet Cute* (co-written with musician Oscar Scheller, whose credits include Arlo Parks, PinkPantheress and Rina Sawayama). "I didn't put any lines around what sounded like me", Mann explains.

The punk-inflected sound of *Say It Back*, she suggests, "captures the childlike frustration of 'Why don't you love me?', the realisation that you can love someone but they're allowed to feel and think differently to you." And the beautiful choral interlude *Only So Far Away* is dedicated to her father, inspired by the trips he took for work and Mann's excitement for him to return. "I liked the idea of writing a lullaby for a child, of singing to them: 'Dads away right now, but he'll be back soon.'" Amidst the musical experimentation, what remains constant is Mann's voice, which forms each syllable and sound in the air like wisps of smoke. She sings like she's whispering her innermost thoughts in your ear, each word delicate but holding within it an entire world.

Final track *Girls* brings *Roxwell* to an end with a strawberry sweet portrait of Mann's two childhood best friends and their memories of growing up together. "*We were girls first*", Mann whispers in a gentle refrain, weaving together the album's threads into a final love letter to her loved ones.

The album ends with a home video clip of baby Matilda cooing: "Goodbye!". With that, *Roxwell* sends us off with an echo of innocence, and Mann into the world as a young adult buoyed by the wonder and warmth of her younger self. Wherever she goes and whatever she does, we know it'll be with love.