

Ready to Sweat

Death Cab for Cutie returns to summery shores.

On the other side of the world, Death Cab for Cutie bassist Nick Harmer is laughing incredulously. "That's crazy talk!" he says upon hearing that temperatures in the Pacific Northwest have been cracking triple digits. "That's not cool! What's going on?"

Harmer and his bandmates have been on tour in Australia; he's sitting in a hotel room in Sydney, where outside it's rainy and cold. After playing one festival and a bunch of their own shows, the band is about to head back to the U.S. "We really felt like we were missing summer here, so we felt like we should go back to the States and stand outside in the hot sun and sweat like crazy," Harmer says.

Since forming in 1997, Death Cab for Cutie has steadily gained listeners, fans who stream into larger and larger venues to hear the band's clear-eyed, emotionally resonant, occasionally anthemic indie rock. Singer Ben Gibbard's lyrics are nostalgic, self-conscious and poignant; through DCFC's first four full-length records, on Seattle indie label Barsuk Records, he crystallized moments, spinning them into stories about hiding cigarettes, finding photos in the glove box or half-dreaming through a road trip. For the band's most recent album, *Plans*, Gibbard's lyrical focus shifted. The album opens with a dream — "If I could

open my arms / And span the length of the isle of Manhattan / I'd bring it to where you are" — but moves into darker places for some of the best songs. In many ways, *Plans*, with its musings on mortality and change, is the band's

most mature album. It's also their first released on a major label.

Harmer says "all good things" about the band's move to Atlantic Records. "We sort of take each day as it comes, and we're figuring out how to be a band and how to exist in this world, and I think we're doing an OK job of it," he says.

Like all DCFC records, *Plans* was produced by the band's multi-talented guitarist-and-more Chris Walla,

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Chris Walla, Ben Gibbard, Nick Harmer and Jason McGerr

who keeps things crisp and clean. "I Will Follow You Into the Dark," a timeless, darkly romantic acoustic ballad, sounds as if it were recorded plainly, in one take, and it's refreshing to hear such an unadorned performance from a now bigger-time band. Though the record doesn't have the immediate hookiness of 2003's *Transatlanticism* — or a song that quite rivals that album's swelling title track — it has the richness of a record that takes time to sink in and then lingers.

As the bassist, Harmer says his role in the songwriting process is "more of a support role, for sure." His deliciously geeky comparison is, "If Ben is Luke Skywalker and Chris is Han Solo, then I'm Chewbacca." Harmer and drummer Jason McGerr, he says, "are there for writing parts and saying 'Yeah, that's a good idea' or ... 'How about this instead?'"

It's been a busy year for DCFC since *Plans* came out last August, with touring, more touring and a January appearance on "Saturday Night Live" that Harmer says was "pretty awesome." Also, there have been plenty of interviews. "I feel like there isn't an inch of this band that hasn't been explored by the press," Harmer says. The band plans to "tour like crazy men" until December. Then, Harmer jokes, "I'll shave my head and grow out the biggest beard I can and disappear for awhile ... nah, we'll take some downtime and start working on the new record. We've already started talking about some things. Ideas, concepts."

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