

PAGAN

THE HOTTEST BANDS OF 2019

Disco punks? Blackened rock'n'rollers? Whatever term you want to throw at this lot, their cult is spreading. And fast...

If you had to sum Pagan up in a word, a solid choice would be 'rebellious'. There's a subversive streak that runs through everything the Melbourne quartet do – from their danceable music, through to their high-kicking live shows and neon, cult imagery – that gleefully defies all expectation.

"When I was a teenager growing up in Victoria, the metalcore scene was buzzing, but it was a real boys' club," recalls vocalist Nikki Brumen, shaking off jet lag after returning home to Australia from the band's first European tour. "Not only would the audience have these particular mosh moves, but even the people onstage had to move a certain way. I always found that really strange, because if you go to a nightclub, not everyone dances the same way. Our music is pretty danceable and I found it really empowering to be like, 'If I wanna shake my arse onstage, I'm gonna fucking do it, and I'm not gonna be put down for it.' I'd rather have a good time and be me than stand still and act like some mosh lord."

If you've witnessed Pagan live then you've

likely already been converted by their feverish energy and intoxicating riffs. But originally the band – completed by guitarist Xav Santilli, bassist Dan Bonnici and drummer Matt Marasco – had no real expectations beyond their first show on Good Friday 2015. The idea, when they formed a year prior, had been to release 13 singles and collate them all on to one LP before disappearing.

"Looking back on it, that is the most absurd and expensive way

to create an LP," laughs Nikki today. "I don't know what we were thinking. Initially, we just wanted to write cool music as friends, but we received such a positive response at that show and started getting a few offers that I think

we all knew that we had cottoned on to something special and that Pagan would be a continuing thing."

Between tours, the group would hole up in a cheap storage shed – boiling in summer and freezing in winter, without any toilets – to hone their sound and craft a cohesive set of songs that would become debut album *Black Wash*. It is a coiled, vibrant record that sidwinds through shades of black metal, punk and disco and is a product of their unique chemistry, which crashed in at number 32 on our recent Albums That Shook 2018 list. Matt's love of French pop music is palpable in the propulsive beats, while the chops each member has worked up in previous metal and hardcore outfits ensures that each hook hits with the force of an atomic-powered bulldozer.

Yet the four friends are all bound by a sense of collective identity, united by a common purpose and the inverted neon cross that emblazons *Black Wash's* cover and glows behind them at sweat-fuelled live shows. "A lot of our favourite bands have an identifiable logo and we wanted it to feel like you're part of our thing, our cult,"

Nikki elaborates. "It's a little bit tongue-in-cheek, but I think having a hot pink cross works perfectly with the theme of the band."

Meanwhile, Nikki's personal fascination with cults, their domineering leaders and the vulnerability of their followers bled into her lyrics as she found a parallel with an abusive relationship in her past. *Blood Moon* in particular tackles how she would be chastised for her emotions during monthly hormonal changes, her voice veering from pained yelps to guttural roars of outrage. If there are moments on *Black Wash* where it sounds like she was on the verge of full collapse, that's because she was: she recorded vocals for all

11 tracks in a single day.

"I got into this zone, but [producer] Mike Deslandes knew that he could keep pushing me," explains Nikki, who is a stickler for proper vocal exercises. "I was the biggest mess after, though."

Xav, Dan and I went for dinner and when I got back to my place I remember having this emotional breakdown. All of the emotion that I had built up over this shit relationship had come out that day and it was the ultimate therapy. I think my body was

unable to sustain that because I needed to get it out of my system."

Their hunger and dedication is starting to pay off now too. Last year Pagan welcomed more fans into their fold by supporting Rise Against in their homeland, while the masses that squeezed into their gigs across the UK and Europe last month is proof positive that their blackened gospel has spread overseas. In particular, Nikki fondly remembers a show in Hamburg where an older gentleman let loose and began dancing like no-one was watching. "He was so awesome and I just thought it was the most punk thing," she beams. Further missions to our shores are being plotted out as we speak and the crew is already formulating ideas for their next

album. But as Nikki emphasises, Pagan have gotten this far by doing things their own way and they're hell-bent on staying that course.

"Ultimately, we made this album for ourselves and if people like it then I think it's a lot more authentic, because we're not trying to be anything else," she says simply. "I mean, we're the kind of band that genuinely love drinking Campari and soda when we get offstage. I drink prosecco onstage all the time and some people find that really funny and weird, but it's who we are. That's the message behind Pagan: don't try to be like the person next to you, just be yourself."

In a world where originality is hard to find, that's an important message to get behind. **!!**

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NIKKI BRUMEN

GET TO KNOW

WHO: Nikki Brumen (vocals), Dan Bonnici (bass), Xavier Santilli (guitar), Matt Marasco (drums).

WHAT: Turbo-charged punk metal that sounds like the bastard offspring of Judas Priest and Michael Jackson.

2019 WILL BE THEIR YEAR BECAUSE... They sound unlike anything else in 2019, with undeniable tunes and conviction to boot.

FOR FANS OF: Marmozets, Kvelertak, Svalbard.

CHECK OUT: Their storming debut album, *Black Wash*.

MORE INFO: Facebook.com/pagancult666