

Indie Artist Fitzsimmons Featured in
THE WASHINGTON POST & SUNDAY BOSTON
GLOBE This Week



His Heartache Made a Connection

Singer's post-breakup album hits soft spot with fans and critics

By James Reed, Globe Staff | April 12, 2009

Two years ago William Fitzsimmons was burning CDs on his home computer and gluing together the little cardboard sleeves and creating the artwork. He was yet another singer-songwriter on his own, living in Pittsburgh, working a day job as a therapist, and tending to music on the side.

"Honestly, I really loved it," he says recently as he motors through Arizona en route to his next gig with his band. "I'd open up my e-mail in the morning and I'd get jazzed to see people had bought my album off my MySpace site. I'd go to the post office and buy some mailers. It felt like it was a special thing."



It's still special, but things have changed since Fitzsimmons's self-released third album became a sleeper hit. "The Sparrow and the Crow" became an iTunes sensation last year, bolstered by several of his songs hitting the TV circuit:

"Grey's Anatomy," "One Tree Hill," "General Hospital," and "Army Wives."

The album, which was given its national release Tuesday on Mercer Street Records, is Fitzsimmons's third home-recorded album since 2005. He's not sure why it's been his breakout, aside from a slow, word-of-mouth build.

Here's a theory: The mostly acoustic album chronicles the demise of his nine-year marriage in threadbare and wrenching terms. In an age where people want - and expect - to know everything, "The Sparrow and the Crow" lets you all the way in. It's an uncensored glimpse of one man's heartache from start to finish; the album is sequenced in a way that charts the cycle of his emotions. His voice, serene yet searching, never rises above a whisper, as if he's telling you his secrets.

"It was actually really hard to record it," he says. "Some days I felt like I got the crap beat out of me, but it is what is. It's a true, honest story."

Obviously, Fitzsimmons could have skewed the album in his favor, but he was committed to relaying both sides of the story. He's tough on himself, and fully admits that he represents the crow referenced in the album's title - inhabiting the qualities of a "loner, unplanning, even evil." The female perspective is given through duets with fellow singer-songwriters Priscilla Ahn and Caitlin Crosby.

Before he became a full-time musician, Fitzsimmons worked as a therapist, but he doesn't exactly see his new career as therapy. "Part of me does," he says, "but I've never looked at music as being a panacea for healing. I don't think it can take you the full way. I think it can get you started."

Fitzsimmons has made a lot of progress since he started writing "The Sparrow and the Crow." He now lives in central Illinois - in a small "freeway-exit" town where much of the action goes down at the local Wal-Mart - and he's remarried. You have to wonder what the second wife thinks of the album.

"She loves it. She's a huge fan," he says. "I think she understands that it [represents] a point in time. It's the story I needed to tell and something I'll be happy to move on from."

Fitzsimmons acknowledges much of his music is relentlessly downtrodden, but he also knows there's an audience for it - one that feels compelled to let him know.

"When someone tells me, 'Man, I really feel what you're writing about,' they're saying it as a compliment, but I feel awful for them," he says. "I'm happy that they buy the record, but I don't wish that kind of pain on anyone."

Now that Fitzsimmons is beyond the days of mailing his albums from the local

post office, he's able to meet, face to face, the people who've brought him this far.

"On this tour, I've met people who tell me they bought one of those records that I glued together myself," he says, "and they've been waiting two years for me to get to where they live."

The Washington Post

Friday, April 17, 2009

WILLIAM FITZSIMMONS *"The Sparrow and the Crow" Mercer Street*



"WE WILL love again/Just not each other," muses *William Fitzsimmons* midway through "The Sparrow and the Crow," a song cycle inspired by his divorce and its aftermath. "Just Not Each Other" struggles about as far toward acceptance as the Pittsburgh-bred singer-songwriter can get on this doleful but

delicately lovely album. At least he works past the brooding of the opening tune, "After Afterall," which turns such standard wedding vows as "till death do us part" into a self-rebuke.

The third of Fitzsimmons's self-made CDs, "The Sparrow and the Crow" was named iTunes' No. 1 singer-songwriter album of 2008 before its recent release by Mercer Street. These 12 songs expand the musician's palette, supplementing Fitzsimmons's breathy vocals and rippling guitar with assertive piano and discreet bass and drums. The most important additions are the voices of Priscilla Ahn and Caitlin Crosby, who duet on such songs as the pretty "Further From You" and the total-bummer-yet-almost-sprightly "You Still Hurt Me." An intimate, late-night sort of album, "The Sparrow and the Crow" benefits both musically and emotionally from the vocal counterpoint. When Fitzsimmons sings, "I will get farther from you," a female voice deftly pulls him back.

-- Mark Jenkins – THE WASHINGTON POST



Singing From Sorrow: William Fitzsimmons

SADNESS SHOULDN'T HAVE such a sweet voice.

William Fitzsimmons' 2008 CD, "**The Sparrow and the Crow**" (Mercer Street) — his third album and the first he didn't self-release — is filled with soft guitar, gentle piano and a warm, whispering vocals, all of which masks the devastating heartbreak lurking just below the calm surface.

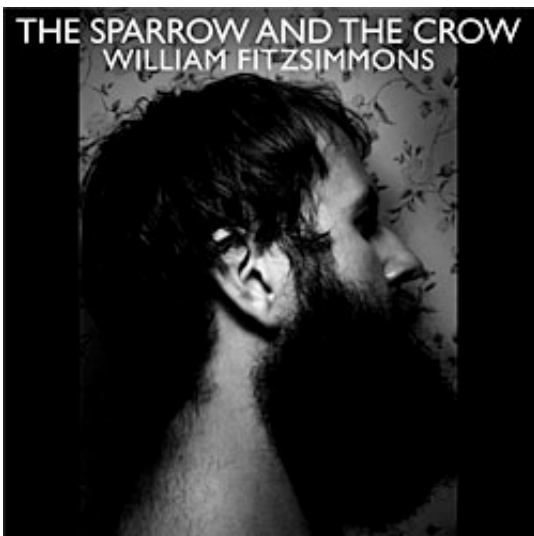
The devil is in the story, and the music's restraint only increases the unsettling horror of

Fitzsimmons' words.

"I set out to make a record about my parents' relationship, the split-up and divorce that took place when I was a teenager," said Fitzsimmons. "In the process of doing that, a lot of things in my own relationship came to a head and fell apart. ... It's meant to chronicle the year following it, which is when things fell apart. I wrote it as a confessional of sorts ... a kind of apology letter"

There's a discomfoting directness to that apology as Fitzsimmons avoids the comforts of privacy and lyrical nuance: "You gave your heart to me alone / I left you out at sea" from "Please Forgive Me: The Song of the Crow" is an example of the plainspoken confessionals that run throughout the CD.

"The last thing I want people to think is for it to come off as some type of finger pointing or whining," said Fitzsimmons. "I don't expect everyone to want to throw in a disc about someone's divorce. ... It's meant to be for the people who are meant to hear that, for whatever reason."



The son of blind parents, Fitzsimmons learned to speak through music from a young age, listening the pipe organ that his father built in his childhood home, as well as orchestral records and a little **James Taylor** and **Bob Dylan**.

"Growing up it's just kind of what we did," said Fitzsimmons. "My brother and I were in marching band, and always taking lessons. We would sing with our mother while she played the piano. It was always there. ... It was just always something I assumed would be part of my life, just be a regular thing."

But music was just part of his life; Fitzsimmons didn't plan on music being his life. The bearded troubadour pursued a career as a mental health therapist, finishing his undergrad work, master's and internship hours before deciding, in his words, "to spend the next 10 years in a van with half-eaten potato-chip bags and smelly musicians."

The decision came after Fitzsimmons' home recordings began receiving heavy traffic on his MySpace page, and then his song "Passion Play" was featured on "**Grey's Anatomy**."

"I wasn't selling anything," said Fitzsimmons. "I had just written a few songs and put it up on MySpace, but people started writing [to me] more and more, so I just started burning [the songs to CD] on my home computer. I bought some glue sticks and made some album artwork. ... I saw it wasn't just a cool little thing for me, that other people seemed to connect with the songs, I think that's what made me start thinking."

And it turned out to not be a long jump between the two worlds.

"We all need a little help," said Fitzsimmons, who worked in the psych unit in a Camden, N.J., hospital. "I see a big connection [between mental therapy and folk music], and I like to think that's not just a rationalization because I have so many student loans. I want the music to mean more than just entertainment. ... I want the songs to challenge people a bit. I'm not opposed to people being offended by it, if it makes them think about how they are living, not in a judgmental way. I think it is like a kind of therapy in that way. It's different, when you're sitting in a room ... with someone that is letting all their dark stuff, the stuff they wouldn't even tell their closest friends, and they are pouring that out to you. ... Therapy is rawer than music has been. Music is an important part to stir people up though."

While Fitzsimmons' second album, "**Goodnight**," explored issues surrounding his parents' divorce, "The Sparrow and the Crow" frames Fitzsimmons' own struggles with a brutal simplicity and a wistful sense of loss that touches even the most lilting, TV-soundtrack-ready tracks. And from the slow-building "If You Would Come Back Home" to the gentle "You Still Hurt Me" and "They'll Never Take the Good Years," Fitzsimmons details every frustrating tear of someone who has loved, lost and can't do anything to make things right.

"I want people to have a little bit of caution about themselves and about relationships," said Fitzsimmons. "I want them to take it a little more seriously than I did at the beginning. I want to put a little fear into people with the music. To say, this is how things can go wrong."

The album's darkness breaks ever so slightly at the end with a sliver of light called "Maybe Be Alright," because amid all the tears, Fitzsimmons still believes in love. "The modal response I want to have is hope," said Fitzsimmons. "I realize that's going to sound cheesy written down or spoken, but that's what I want people to have, hope that they can get through a situation like this, because I have, and I'm in a good place, and in a good place with the stuff that happened with my folks. Wounds can heal."
Written by WASHINGTON POST Express' Nathan Martin

Birmingham
magazine

**Multi-instrumentalist
William Fitzsimmons is a
study in contrasts**

4/09 By Carla Jean Whitley

Months ago, a friend introduced me to William Fitzsimmons' music. He's hilarious in concert, my friend said, and the music is really great. That introduction piqued my curiosity, but I've got to admit I was surprised to discover that this very funny songwriter was singing dark, emotional folk music. After listening to the lyrics, I wasn't so surprised to

learn that Fitzsimmons is a former therapist who began recording his songs at the end of his graduate studies. The contrast between Fitzsimmons' sense of humor and his dark, thoughtful songs will be on display during an April 23 concert at WorkPlay.

Birmingham Box Set: Why did you end up making the transition from therapist to musician? I will say, I don't always think the two are entirely dissimilar.

William Fitzsimmons: Right, right. Honestly, I don't feel like I ever really left therapy entirely. Like you said, yeah, I think there's a huge overlap. I try to be as intentional about that as I can. I see myself less as an entertainer and more as ... more as a therapist.

It's not therapy, per se. There's nothing that can replace relationships with people. ... Those are important and I wouldn't want to cheapen that process by saying I'm doing the same thing. I try to think of the songs as ways that me and other people can find our ways through stuff.

BBS: In one of your blog entries, you reference the healing powers of music and say that you really don't understand how that works. I really think that's one of the great mysteries of life. I can't understand it, but music really is that powerful.

WF: I don't think anyone does. But there's something about it. There's a *je ne sais quoi*. There's an indefinable quality to it. I love that not everybody gets what I'm doing. I really do. That's a neat thing because the people who do get it, that means [they're really into it]. It makes a pretty rewarding experience. I end up feeling pretty lucky most days.

I don't have a lot to complain about. I could, but that would kind of make me a jerk considering.

BBS: With such confessional lyrics and such deep subject matter, is it difficult to play these songs in front of people night after night?

WF: Yeah. It is. Honestly, it depends on the night. It depends on where my head's at and how much sleep I've gotten the night before. There's any number of factors that go into it. It's a bit like reliving the worst time of your life every single day, which obviously it's not a great deal of fun to do that.

But I got to a point where I learned that I wasn't the only one who was benefiting from the songs. Forgive the arrogance in that statement, but just last night there was not a small number of people who came up after the show—we were in Columbia, Mo.—and people just said, I just wanted you to know that your record helped me through some of the darkest stuff I've gone through. Even a few guys came up who had gone through or were going through divorces.

... Things like that, it gives me a bit of relief. I don't have to focus on myself the whole time. ... I can look out at people and say, we're all in this together a little bit. Not that my heart isn't in the songs every night. It is.

BBS: Even so, your songs provide plenty of contrast, at times sounding more hopeful and soothing than the lyrics suggest.

WF: The content is very, very dark. That's intentional. I did that more with this record than I have in the past, because it didn't need to be any heavier. Like you said, the content was already in a certain place.

I kind of do the same thing, I try to make the same dynamic at shows as well. I try to be as light and have as much levity to the performance as possible. You don't need to force it. I've been to show where the music is already pretty melancholic and the show is on top of that. People are spending money on that. No one wants to leave the show feeling worse than they did.

BBS: I mean, going to a concert is still a form of entertainment.

WF: Entertainment, it's the medium through which I'm able to hopefully communicate some more serious things to people. It's my Trojan horse, I guess.

BBS: And I've been told you're actually quite funny in concert. How does that contrast play out on stage?

WF: I'm hilarious. No, I am, I really am. It's important. It's a whole range of things. Look, there are some people that cry at my shows and there are some people who laugh at my shows and I couldn't be happier about that. People are getting what they need to. [It's like life.] You stub your toe in the morning and you're getting a nice word in the evening.

BBS: One article I read mentioned you covering "King of Wishful Thinking" during a concert, which I thought was a pretty funny contrast to your own music.

WF: I personally think that was one of the greatest pop songs that was ever written. It's just a ridiculous melody and the lyrics are amazing. It's really dated now if you listen to it, but at the core it's just a really wonderful song. It fits in the core of what I'm writing about.

[I retired it, but] it just feels good. I'll pull up a live version of Go West doing that somewhere in London, and it puts a smile on your face.

BBS: How many instruments do you play, exactly? How does that play out on tour?

WF: I don't know. Somebody wrote seven. I'm going off of what somebody else wrote about me.

It's a bit of a jack of all trades, master of none thing. I'm not Prince. He can pick up a guitar and play it as masterfully as he can 20 or 30 other instruments. That's not me. But I consider myself proficient in several.

BBS: What are those?

WF: Piano, guitar, ukulele, banjo, mandolin, triangle. Guitar is really my, that's where my heart is for music. I didn't learn that until years after I was already playing piano and trombone and a few others.

BBS: Do you stick to guitar on tour, then?

WF: Yeah, more out of efficiency than anything else. When there's an opportunity to play piano I will. There's a few songs on the album that require piano and I don't like to play them without, because that's the way the song wants to be ...

BBS: Your most recent album, *The Sparrow and the Crow*, was just released in physical copy earlier this month. Did the transition from home studio to recording in a studio affect your music?

WF: It definitely did. I was very hesitant, part of me was hesitant to go into the studio. The primary issue was I was giving up control of all the positions. That's what I'd had before. I had friends that came in and contributed to, mostly the middle record, the *Goodnight* record. I'm one of those types of people who, with certain areas of my life, I just want to do it myself. I know what I want in my head. Sometimes it's just easier to grab the reins yourself than trust someone else's hand.

It came to the point where because of what I was writing about, they were very imp to me and ... they had to be the best they possibly could be. So that was it. That was the choice. Once I realized I would've been limiting the record ... I decided to find somebody that could make it work.

It was very different some days, most days, making it because of that. We had two different people who are both trying to get their ideas at the forefront of each song. The neat thing about it was looking back, it was 50 times better than what I could have done myself. ... I was thankful for the hard days too because I think that's where most of the quality came from.

BBS: What's ahead for you? Will having a label's backing affect your plans?

WF: I hope so. ... I think touring is really, that's the primary goal. That's something that I didn't have to do for the first couple years really. I got very, very lucky. People just randomly finding the music and buying it was actually supporting me fully. It's a very weird thing. I was able to stay at home and make music and write, maybe play a show here and there. At this point I'm playing catch up with that. The people who have been listening to the CD in their car for 18 months, have never seen a show, I'm trying to tap them on the shoulder. "Hey, I'm actually touring now." That part's going well. It's been fun to catch up with the album sales. The goal is to stay out and we'll go back to Europe, to the UK this year, to the UK for the first time.

I want to sit down and write again at some point but I've learned from past mistakes if I do that too soon after making a record, it ends up being glorified B sides.