

When Southampton's Band Of Skulls played a sold-out gig at London's Forum in October 2010, it was a performance befitting a band honed by two years of constant touring, their sun-kissed melodies sweeter than ever, their riffs heavier and dirtier.. "In our minds, our first album [2009's debut album *Baby Darling Doll Face Honey*] was quite an intimate little record," says singer/guitarist Russell Marsden from behind his trademark bug-eye shades, "But it turned into this huge rock thing in venues across the world."

The Forum gig marked the end of one chapter in this young band's life. Late in 2010, faced with the prospect of beginning work on their as-yet untitled second album, they stole away to a remote studio in rural Norfolk with nothing but each other, their instruments and some strong red wine for company. "It seemed like a good way of decompressing everything that had happened to us, all the adventures we'd had, but it was like a big, dramatic therapy session," says Marsden. "It was desolate, lonely and bitterly cold. We were on our own in a room playing the same four chords at each other." After weeks of isolation, heavy snow started falling. "We all had a massive panic attack about getting snowed in and so we bolted," says Marsden. "It was like a prison break."

January brought a new perspective and a new location – the trio returned to the cradle of their first album, their home studio in Southampton. "It's a tiny little room, but there's something about it," says the drummer. "If you can make something sound good in there, it'll sound good anywhere."

The creative juices soon started flowing, and the three songwriters – Marsden, Hayward and Richardson – were collaborating more fully than ever before. Scraps of melodies, lyrics and riffs fell into place, and complete songs began to emerge: the slow-burning album opener Sweet Sour, rockers Lies and The Devil Takes Care Of His Own. The results were designed for bigger crowds. "We wanted to write material that's primed for where we'd got to," says Marsden. "Beefier songs for bigger stages."

By the time they reached Rockfield, the legendary residential studio in Wales, the band were primed to road-test the new material, playing a handful of US dates in a break from the album sessions. The response was electrifying: at the Beachside Festival in San Diego, one over-zealous fan rocked out so hard during new track You're Not Pretty But You've Got It Going On he was Tasered by the police. "I guess he was having too much of a good time," shrugs Richardson. "It felt like a real moment".

Later, a performance at the Bonnaroo festival went on to shape the album's character. "The new songs went down so well there we decided to incorporate some of the mistakes and mishaps into the studio versions," says Marsden. "We had Ian [*Davenport, returning Baby Darling... producer*] jumping on top of our Fender amps to recreate one bit where the reverb was crackling and making weird noises. All the gear still had the dust and mud on it from the festival, so the dirt was there – a bit of filth from the road that made it onto the record."

At the other end of the spectrum, tracks such as Hometowns, look closer to the band's Southampton origins for inspiration. "A lot of the songs reference coming back home, realising how important it is to have that base," says Richardson. Three years ago, they

couldn't wait to get away...

Marsden and Hayward have been making music together since the latter was 12. "When me and Russ started playing together, dad wouldn't let us play a gig until we were good enough," says Hayward. "By the time of our debut gig we were the most over-rehearsed school band in England."

Richardson, who designs all of the band's artwork, was drawn in after meeting Marsden at art college in Winchester, despite having never before picked up a bass. Naming themselves Fleeing New York, there followed a long period of frustratingly gradual progress, during which the threesome took jobs working in venues around Southampton. "We always had odd jobs, but always with the mentality that it was going to happen for us one day," says Hayward. "Pulling pints in music venues was frustrating because you'd see these bands coming through and you'd be like, For fuck's sake, I *so badly* want to do this."

The band's fortunes changed when they launched their own monthly shindig – Club Skull – at Southampton's Talking Heads venue, where they hosted artists including Anna Calvi, Thomas Tantrum and Jim Jones Revue and saved the headline slot for themselves. "It ended up being the local hang for all the bands," remembers Marsden. "People would make up there, break up there... get pregnant!" It gave the trio a platform and a name: it's here that Band Of Skulls were born.

The feverish response to Band Of Skulls in America, Australia, across Europe and elsewhere has happened as a result of a few things. Getting a global iTunes Single Of The Week with I Know What I Am helped (and as a result, Baby Darling Doll Face Honey was rush-released to meet demand). Their appearance on the Twilight: New Moon soundtrack in 2009 helped too, though the band claimed at the time to be oblivious to the phenomenon – they'd missed the first film and they'd not read the books, but if it was good enough for the quality of band's included, it was good enough for them. The effect was short lived, they now say: "For a period of a couple of months we saw younger people turning up to shows in Edward Cullen T-shirts, but they sort of disappeared again," says Richardson. The Mustang ad which ran across prime time US TV had more effect and elevated Light of The Morning into a stand out live track recognized by all the crowd.

With the attention afforded to them from audiences in far away places, the UK eventually caught up too. "You can do something so close up to the eyeball of England that you can be overlooked at first," says Marsden. "It's only when you go away and do something of note elsewhere that you're given a hearing." And that's exactly what happened – they're soon to headline Camden's Roundhouse, where they're set to unleash their fresh arsenal of songs. "That's how we see it," says Marsden. "Songs are your weapons. You might walk into somewhere and it's got a barbed wire-fronted stage, so you hit the crowd with your heavy rock stuff. Sometimes the vibe is quite delicate, so you play the quiet stuff. We can do both. We're the Swiss Army Knife of bands."