



★ HIGH HOPES

# Empyre

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**“I remember playing in an abandoned zoo in Ibiza. That was pretty surreal.”**

The intensity of Pearl Jam. The mishaps of Spinal Tap. Meet the next great Midlands rock band...

ALL SIGNS SUGGEST that Empyre take this rock'n'roll business pretty seriously. At shows, fans are encouraged to stand in focused silence, neither clapping nor singing along. At photoshoots, the Northampton four-piece project a stony-faced, funeral-ready image. And on their dazzling debut album, *Self Aware*, the closest musical reference point is Pearl Jam at their most glowering and emotionally intense.

The curious flipside is that Empyre are also one of the least serious bands you could wish to interview. Formed just three years ago by frontman Henrik Steenholdt and lead guitarist Did Coles, with drummer Elliot Bale soon coming aboard, the band already have a stockpile of drink-soaked war-stories that usually revolve around hapless bassist Grant Hockley. “He went arse over tit in a piggyback race and ripped open his palm,” recounts Steenholdt. “Another time, he ruptured his calf muscle and had to play the next gig on a chair, killing the pain with lager. He’s got hair down to his arse, and on our last tour, he was headbanging and managed to get it caught in my guitar. So I had to play the final riff of the night tied to Grant.”

Likewise, Empyre’s straight-faced image doesn’t square with farcical early gigs plucked almost literally from *Spinal Tap*. “I remember playing an abandoned zoo in Ibiza,” says a bemused

Steenholdt. “We were in an amphitheatre, on a performing seal stage with an Arctic backdrop and a moat in front of us, where the seals would have dived into the water and come back onstage. That was pretty surreal.”

Hi-jinks aside, Steenholdt still smarts at the frustration of fruitless mailshots to a disinterested music industry (“That’s the toughest time, when nobody listens and nobody cares”). But the quality of *Self Aware*’s material is opening doors, from *BBC Introducing* to ‘Whispering’ Bob Harris’s *Under The Apple Tree Sessions*. “*Only Way Out* is an about pining after someone

you think is the solution to all your problems,” says the singer. “*Cut To The Core* is the verbal annihilation of someone who’s been lying to you. *Homegrown*, that’s an anti-religious song, about the guilt instilled in people to keep them under control. We’re inspired by a slightly cynical, realist outlook. But we’re not a political band. We just write about what we observe.”

So how about that title, *Self Aware*? Steenholdt shrugs: “We know that these days, rock music is not that cool. We’re a bunch of guys with an average age in the early thirties. The hipsters aren’t gonna like us. But we know what we are. We’re somewhere between ‘muso’ and ‘dad-rock’. And we’re happy being there. I just hope we’re doing something to bring rock’n’roll back. Northampton is in the Midlands, but it doesn’t have the rock history of a city like Birmingham or Sheffield. So we want to put our town on the map.” **HY**

*Self Aware* is out now. For gig updates visit [empyre.co.uk](http://empyre.co.uk)

FOR FANS OF...



“I’ll go with Pearl Jam’s *Ten*. You’ve got the dark, melancholy intensity of a song like *Black*. You’ve got a lot of big riffs like *Alive*. You’ve got the emotive vocals of Eddie Vedder. And Mike McCready and Stone Gossard have these really innovative guitar parts that merge together, which is pretty much what Did and I try to do.”