

## Inside Car Seat Headrest's New-Old 'Fantasy' Why is Will Toledo following up his indie-rock breakthrough with a painstaking remake of an intimate 2011 LP?

By

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Car Seat Headrest's Will Toledo discusses his heady rise to indie stardom – and why he wanted to remake his intimate 2011 LP 'Twin Fantasy.' (Griffin Lotz)

It's a small room. More of a closet really. Toward the back, there's an upright piano; on the left, a large Marshall guitar amplifier, a box of Pop-Tarts and an electric heater. On the floor, a backpack and a flimsy mattress where [Car Seat Headrest](#) mastermind Will Toledo has been sleeping for the past two weeks. For all intents and purposes, this is home: Decade Music Studios, on the fourth floor of a nondescript commercial building on the North Side of Chicago. Back in the place that he currently says is home, Seattle, Toledo has been living out of a suitcase while staying in different Airbnb spaces because the house he was living in was recently sold. His hometown of Leesburg, Virginia – a quaint suburb the now-25-year-old singer-songwriter describes as overrun “with like 50 banks” – hasn't really been home for a while.

The past couple of years have been a whirlwind for Toledo. Following a series of beloved cult records released on Bandcamp, his solo-project-turned-band Car Seat Headrest was signed to indie-rock bastion Matador in 2015. He put together a touring group with guitarist Ethan Ives, bassist Seth Dalby and drummer Andrew Katz, and in 2016, put out the expansive album *Teens of Denial*, which earned him wide acclaim, and [placed fourth on \*Rolling Stone's\* Best Albums of 2016 list](#). With his penchant for grandiose songcraft, slashing guitars and earworm-y melodies, Toledo has been hailed by some as the latest in a line of left-field rock legends including Television's Tom Verlaine, Guided by Voices' Robert Pollard and Pavement's Stephen Malkmus. And, fittingly for an opinionated artist on the rise, he's publicly thrown shade at everything from Sufjan Stevens' *Carrie & Lowell* LP to Netflix drama *13 Reasons Why* – and coped with the attendant social-media fallout.

It's December 2016 and Toledo's purpose for enduring Decade's spartan conditions in the dead of the sub-zero Chicago winter is clear. He's here to breathe new life into the greatest artistic achievement of his relatively brief but impressively prolific career, by recording, mixing and mastering an enhanced version of his poignant, quasi-autobiographical 2011 album, *Twin Fantasy*. It might seem like an odd move to revisit an old album as a follow-up to a critically heralded breakout LP – at a time when more eyes are on him than ever – but Toledo either doesn't pay attention to this notion or simply doesn't care. This is something he has to do and, in fact, was part of his initial deal when he signed with Matador.

It will take many months to get his *Twin Fantasy* remake exactly right, requiring multiple visits back to the cozy confines of that little room, and countless demanding hours sitting in front of a recording console, tweaking every guitar break, every drum fill, every “yip,” “ooh” and “ahh.”

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His band's overstuffed schedule of summer festival appearances and a grueling run through Europe in the fall of 2016, which he cites as the low point of the past two years – “being on that bus with no sleep and just the same task day after day and feeling like we're getting nowhere” – makes the recording even more laborious, but Toledo's meticulous attention to detail culminates in a sonic document that towers over the crusty, lo-fi original. Listening to the albums back to back – the new version, also called *Twin Fantasy*, will be out February 16th – is like watching the IMAX version of a film you've only ever seen in grainy Super 8. “This one has totally replaced the old one in my mind,” Toledo says. “I was not in the same place then. It felt at times like doing a cover record. The old one is by a different artist that I don't necessarily like as much as the one I've turned into.”

***Twin Fantasy* is, in broad strokes**, a concept album. It's a hooky, euphoric and intensely raw snapshot of a doe-eyed college relationship. Its style is confessional, if not a bit meandering, with scenes and set pieces that would ring embarrassingly true to anyone who's ever made it out of the most vulnerable state of adolescence. Late nights. Drunken debauchery. Uttered truths you desperately wish you could take back. In more succinct terms, it's the sound of someone figuring out exactly who they are.

When asked how much of his own life can be gleaned from the record, Toledo keeps his responses vague. “I think that it's an emotional arc that's real, and it was inspired by real events,” he allows. “At this point, there's so much layered on top of it that it's hard to tell a straightforward narrative about it, but it definitely deals with events that were important to me at the time and still are.” When asked if the record involves people still within his orbit, he smiles shyly and lowers his head. “We keep in touch.”

The big question is, why now? Why revisit your past self at this particular moment? “I kind of felt that these were demos I was recording when I was doing the original thing,” he explains, leaning back into a couch. “I felt like I could re-record it better. So far, it's worked out.”

Ask some of Car Seat Headrest's most ardent fans and they'll often cite *Twin Fantasy* as their favorite among Toledo's many projects, surpassing even the emotional resonance of the critically adored *Teens of Denial*. While some artists might worry about tinkering with a record already beloved by the most hardcore subset of their fan base, Toledo is pretty sanguine about the prospect.

"I'm interested to see what they'll think," he says. "They might not be OK with how we treat the old record. It might get wiped for a little bit. I'm sure we'll get complaints about that, but they can deal with it." Given the time, space and resources he's been afforded to tinker with the music he first recorded on a computer at 19, his goal is no less than sonic perfection. Some nights he sits with headphones on, going over a single line over and over again, adding a bit of compression here or a different kind of filter there just to see how it will affect the total mix.

A singular scream of the word "That!" in the song "Beach Life-in-Death" takes up almost a whole evening. Ripping off his headphones, he reveals the culprit of his concern. "I hear a clicking," he says, before ceding the chair and allowing his engineer to have a listen. This song is of particular importance. It was the first one that he re-completed, and as such, it set the tone for the aural expansiveness he was after for his new *Twin Fantasy*. In the song's present state, there are 20 different guitar parts layered together in the opening section alone. "Back in July we had a version with about half a dozen, and it just felt empty," Toledo explains dryly.

"It's really about getting it perfect," he says of the focus and energy he's dedicated to the project. "It's coming out right at a certain peak in my career where a lot of people are going to be listening to it, and I think it's going to be around for a while, so I just really wanted to make sure that I could go in and listen to it five years from now and not really regret any of the decisions I made production-wise."

Self-satisfaction is only one of the factors fueling his determination. The other is plain ambition. "I think at this point my goal with each album is to bring in a new audience. With *Teens of Denial* we brought in a much wider crowd within the indie circle, and I hope with this new record we can bring in a crowd beyond that. As far as mainstream appeal, I think it's super clean. It doesn't really sound like an indie-rock record to me. It sounds like a pop record to me. That was one of my goals going into it, and I'm really happy with how it came out. It's clean and accessible, but it's dense and it interests me at the same time. It's changing constantly."



**"Changing constantly"** is a good description of Toledo's life ever since he signed with Matador, graduating from a Bandcamp buzz artist to one of the premier up-and-coming rock acts of the moment. Since *Teens*, he's performed everywhere from the U.K., Australia and major U.S. festival stages to a resort

town in Italy where Car Seat Headrest played a sparsely attended gig for just 40 fans. “Our sound guy said, ‘No, it’s 200.’ But you could literally count the people.” He spent his most recent birthday on a tour bus watching episodes of *Mad Men*.

The benefit of all this time on the road, as draining as it’s been, is that Car Seat Headrest are more of a *band* than they ever were before, even while Toledo likes to retain his auteur role in the studio. “It feels like a band when we’re performing live and when we’re touring,” he says. “Recording is sort of opposite from that. They come in and I tell them what to do; they head out and I keep working. It seems to work out fine. I think in the future we’ll collaborate more on making stuff together.”

As he considers the next steps in his musical evolution, one figure has emerged as a sort of signpost for where he wants to go. “In the past two years, David Bowie has come to the forefront as the sort of model for writing,” he says. “He wasn’t really ever really writing super universal stuff. Even when he was collaborating with Queen to make ‘Under Pressure,’ he’s singing lines that are a lot darker than what Freddie Mercury is singing, and it’s a great contrast. But at the same time, he was a pop writer. And who knows what was going on with him when he was writing this stuff, but it feels very personal.”

Classic rock – the Beatles, the Beach Boys, Pink Floyd – has always been the wellspring that Toledo has drawn from while creating his own grand artistic statements, but lately he’s been incorporating other influences as well. One late evening – deep into the mixing process, after a long session tracking a new version of “Beach Life-in-Death” – we take a break and head out to grab some juice at a nearby convenience store.

Along the way, Toledo expresses his admiration for the performance ability of James Brown, which is echoed on the song “Cute Thing” – “God, give me Frank Ocean’s voice/And James Brown’s stage presence” – and has lately given thought to making his bandmates dress up in uniform. He later marvels at Nine Inch Nails’ *The Downward Spiral*, singling out Trent Reznor’s plaintive ballad “Hurt” for special praise, while also copping to having been entranced by the visuals Frank Ocean assembled for *Blonde*.

When Toledo returns to the studio, however, rather than dig back into the work at hand, he takes a seat as the engineer, Adam, dials up the White Album, and we spend the rest of the evening praising John Lennon, while mostly skipping through Paul compositions like “Rocky Raccoon” and “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da.” George gets a lot of love as well. While Car Seat Headrest have, and no doubt forever will, draw comparisons to the likes of Pavement and Guided by Voices, with their gnarly, overdriven soundworlds, to really understand where Toledo is coming from, you have to consider his work through the lens of the Fab Four.

**In classic Lennon-like fashion**, Toledo’s unabashed, publicly stated opinions have caused several headaches during the past year. There was a short dust-up after he disparaged Sufjan Stevens’ album *Carrie & Lowell*, and his swipe at the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why* – Toledo called its portrayal of teen suicide “kind of fucked” – which featured one of his songs, incited an online brouhaha. A sub-beef with Titus Andronicus frontman Patrick Stickles followed.

“After that, I have consciously avoided inciting controversy in my public statements,” he says. “I think it’s for the best. Why bother voicing a negative opinion unless it’s a persuasive argument? Why not present it in a way that you’re not looking like an asshole? I think those are decent lessons to take away from it.”

Toledo noticeably perks up when talk turns to the future. A few months back, while sitting in one of the stiff, plastic booths of a McDonalds within walking distance of the recording studio that was and wasn’t home for the past year, he reflected on what he’s managed to accomplish.

“I think I achieved what I set out to do,” he says optimistically in between bites of a cheeseburger. “I kind of had everything sort of neatly tied up in my mind, but when it came time to put some of the last touches on it, I kind of left it unfinished in a way. Or some stuff, I added without knowing exactly what it meant, which is better. I think the original was kind of like that. Maybe when I revisit this one in seven years, I’ll understand more about it. Right now, I have less of an idea about what it’s about than I ever did before.”

Oh, and that little room? “I don’t miss it, but it was convenient.”

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