

Ted Joyner and Grant Widmer knew they had balked before they even got home. In the Fall of 2021, Joyner and Widmer—for a dozen years, the beguiling garage-pop pair known as Generationals—wrapped the second of two sessions in Georgia for a new EP. They'd opted out of the process of file-sharing they had used for years. Choosing instead to cut songs straight to tape in Athens, a spiritual epicenter for their brand of twinkling tunes. The results sounded great, but they didn't think their songs were actually that exciting or up to snuff. Why busy everyone else with the rigamarole of releasing a record when they weren't convinced by it themselves? Joyner and Widmer scrapped the sessions, relieved. The decision, after all, did not represent some existential crisis for Generationals, some what-are-we-doing-here panic; it was, instead, a validation of trusting their process and respective enthusiasms, of releasing great records rather than churning out substandard "content." Before the veto was final, Joyner and Widmer were working on songs they already knew passed that test.

*Heatherhead* is the winning result of that restart. Effortless and endearing, as settling as a long hug from an old friend, *Heatherhead* is not only the best Generationals album yet but also the one that, after all these years, finds Joyner and Widmer at last epitomizing their sound. These 11 songs are no-fuss, no-filler manifestations of Generationals' bittersweet beauty, of would-be rock anthems made to feel like cozy sweaters. Maybe it's the way the thick riff of the indelible "Dirt Diamond" frames a vulnerable admission or how the taut rhythm section of "Hard Times for Heatherhead" buoys a smitten plea, but this record at large feels like Joyner and Widmer digging deeper into the juxtapositions that have long made Generationals so compelling—distinct but familiar, wry but warm, soft but pointed. *Heatherhead* is the record Joyner and Widmer have been pursuing from the start.

All was not lost down in Georgia, it seems, as the act of recording in the same room seemed to shake something loose for Joyner and Widmer. With Joyner still in the band's hometown of New Orleans and Widmer now in Wisconsin, they'd grown comfortable passing ever-evolving tracks back and forth, adding parts or offering suggestions to one another as albums steadily cohered. They'd done compelling stuff that way, too. But after abandoning those in-person sessions, they decided to commingle ideas earlier this time. Joyner escaped the Louisiana heat in June 2022 by heading north, the two rendezvousing in Madison with loads of demos. They augmented one another's takes in real time, shaping songs that fell together like puzzle pieces. When a tornado ripped through Widmer's front yard and left them without power for days, they took it not as a sign to stop but as an invitation to just enjoy still being the buds in Generationals, drinking warm beer and listening to an emergency radio together.

Back in their respective quarters, Joyner and Widmer went to work with multi-instrumentalist, producer, and pal Nick Krill (The War on Drugs, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, Spinto Band), creating a cross-country file-sharing triangle. They moved quickly, finishing *Heatherhead*—their sixth LP, but first in four years—that way in a mere matter of months. Despite all their fretting a year earlier about making music together in a room, these songs somehow felt more conversational and lived-in, like two old pals throwing a few back and tunefully singing of toil and joy. The true circumstances are ironic, given that, for 42 minutes, you feel like you're right there with them.

Indeed, these are the sorts of songs you want to stay with for a while, to crawl inside of and have a look around for all the crafty details. Notice the way the sizzling little riff seems to bounce between the walls of “Elena,” an enchanting collaboration with Sarah Jaffe that glows like a woodstove in a winter cabin. Marvel at the muted funk of “Eutropius (Give Me Lies),” particularly the way the byzantine drum lines percolate beneath Joyner’s cotton-candy falsetto. And enjoy the marvelous seesaw of opener “Waking Moment,” a song that squeezes a dozen dynamic shifts and at least half as many hooks into four minutes that are as cool as a breeze. You can do this with every song on *Heatherhead*, limn those bits that give these seemingly billowing tunes real ballast; you could, on the other hand, just let them surround you, seemingly simple pleasures abounding.

“Closer to your death than to your birth,” Joyner sings during “Faster Than a Fever,” his voice traced by spring-loaded drums and sighing keys. “You’re gonna be upset to miss your favorite part.” It would be tempting for a band like Generationals—now well into their second decade—to let such an anxious feeling override their instincts. That might mean putting out something they didn’t love or reinventing their approach to chase a fanciful trend. To the contrary, Joyner and Widmer now have a better understanding of who they want to be and how they want to sound than ever before. You can hear it in every distinct but familiar, wry but warm, soft but pointed second of *Heatherhead*—a perpetually renewing relationship that gave them the wherewithal to pursue these 11 songs, apart and then together and apart again.