

Stroke of genius

Julian Casablancas has delivered a great solo album, writes **Sally Browne**

JULIAN Casablancas, lead singer of The Strokes, says the band's last trip to Australia in 2006 was a bit of a "blurry nightmare".

Not that it was Australia's fault. He was just going through some "strange personal stuff", and now the 31-year-old hipster and father of one is in a much better place.

Not only will he be back with his band of brothers to headline the Splendour in the Grass festival, held at Woodford in July, he also arrives this week for a string of dates supporting his stellar solo debut *Phrazes for the Young*.

"I love Australia and I'm super excited to hang out there," he says enthusiastically down the phone from Montreal. "I know it sounds so phony. But seriously, everywhere, I've got a new kind of appreciation, so it's been fun."

And Strokes fans have been gaining a new appreciation of his solo work. *Phrazes for the Young*, driven by the buzz of catchy lead single *11th Dimension*, has been deservedly winning rave reviews for its strong, simple song-writing laden with a rich coating of '70s and '80s synth.

The title of the new album is a reference to an Oscar Wilde book – and it's one Casablancas saved up from the Strokes' last record.

"I stumbled upon the book – I was on the last page and it just kind of grabbed me," he says. "I just kind of stuck with it. Somehow it became one of the names in the running for the last Strokes record, *First Impressions of Earth*."

But as the band's key songwriter, Casablancas didn't feel that lyrically the Strokes' record was up to the task of carrying such a weighty title.

So for his solo record, he made a concerted effort to get the lyrics up to scratch.

"Not that they are," he says modestly. "But at least it made me try really hard."

"I think I concentrated on music so long that lyrics were kind of secondary. I knew how to make things kind of cool and not annoying and work with the song, and mysterious and deep or whatever, but I feel like once I felt confident musically, now I've got to focus on lyrics."

Chatting to Casablancas is a pleasure. His conversation is peppered with words like "rad" and "dude", although he's equally happy talking about old dead poets. He swings from being softly spoken to sing-song loud, as if an amusing accent might make his words more interesting, and he

attentively goes off topic, asking this interviewer as many questions as she asks him.

"My favourite poet is Rumi," he throws out there, referring to the 13th century Sufi poet.

"I read a lot of that; try to make lyrics like that because he was also a musician. Also Lou Reed."

Casablancas recalls a time when he and the rest of the young, then unsigned Strokes were in a bar in New York when they heard that the great Velvet Underground singer was signing books at a store across the street.

The band pooled their money together and bought a copy of Reed's book, which the legendary rocker signed to "The Strokes".

As fate would have it, the two singers shared a stage years later singing *Walk on the Wild Side* for a *Rolling Stone* magazine anniversary event.

"I was at sound check and he walked in saying, 'You do a pretty good imitation, you don't even need me, why am I here?'" Casablancas recalls. "We played with Eddie Vedder too that night. It was pretty crazy!" he warbles.

Casablancas, the son of a former Miss Denmark and the founder of Elite Model Management, was educated at a private school, along with the rest of the Strokes alumni. But he reckons he's only ever read two books. They just happen to be *The Odyssey* and *Crime and Punishment*.

He's now tackling *Siddhartha* by Herman Hesse, set in the time of the Buddha, and the Bible.

Not exactly easy tour reading. No wonder he generally prefers to "play cards or watch a movie".

Wherever his past highs and lows with The Strokes might have taken him, Casablancas seems in a good place now.

His wife, Juliet Joslin, gave birth late last year. Has it changed him?

"Yeah, I got a new haircut, moved to the suburbs," he jokes. "Change for the great – because obviously a magical little man has arrived. And I'm torn; part of me wants him to stay little and part of me wants to hang out and talk to him and can't wait till he's older."

He married the Strokes' former assistant manager in 2005.

Is the lyric, "How could you be so perfect for me?" from *Out of the Blue* about her?

"Sure," he says after a long pause. "I've got to walk a fine line when I talk about these things."

"I don't want to lame it up. I actually sometimes make songs just for my woman, I just feel like I don't know about doing it publicly. I could be wrong. Sometimes people do it and it makes me want to puke. That's a harsh way to put it."

As ever, he's one of the politest rockers around.

Phrazes for the Young is out now. Julian Casablancas performs at the Tivoli on Thursday.

I've got a new kind of appreciation, so it's been fun



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CD REVIEWS

POP

Y Not
Ringo Starr
(Universal)

★★★★☆



JUST months from his 70th birthday, Ringo Starr can afford to sit back and reflect on his amazing showbiz career. Here Starr joins forces with a respectable team of rockers to deliver a heartfelt and reflective collection of songs that in a minor way mirrors Paul McCartney's 2007 album *Memory Almost Full*. With songs co-written and performed with Joe Walsh, Van Dyke Parks, Dave Stewart, Gary Wright, Richard Marx and Joss Stone, Starr shows a surprising sincerity and earnestness and – for his age – a reasonable voice as well, displayed best on his sweet duet with McCartney, *Walk With You*. On *The Other Side of Liverpool* he recounts a little of his history, completing a trifecta of remember-when songs from former Beatles (McCartney's *That Was Me* and George Harrison's *When We Was Fab*) and on *Peace Dream* namechecks Lennon. Within

its lean 36 minutes there are some trite pop and corny country-flavoured tracks that hark back to his cringeworthy classics, but he finishes strongly on *Who's Your Daddy*, a rollicking boogie-woogie Joss Stone duet.

Graeme Hammond

ELECTRO

Two Door Cinema Club

Tourist History
Kitsune Music

★★★★☆



A TRIO of lads from Northern Ireland has burst on to the music scene with the release of this debut album. While the lyrics aren't much to rave about, *Tourist History* is a fresh, confident and fun package. Each song showcases the gentle vocals of Alex Trimble, dynamic guitar riffs of Sam Halliday and bass lines of Kevin Baird, with a flair for creating a fast-pace dance beat. The unexpected trumpet in the opening *Cigarettes In the Theatre*, the echoing of an uplifting chorus in

Something Good Can Work and the addictive *Undercover Martyn* are indications of a confident group.

Anna Rodway

ALT ROCK

Violent Soho
Ecstatic Soho!

★★★★☆



HEAVING guitar riffs, musical mood swings and a relentless approach spells the emphatic arrival of exciting Brisbane four-piece Violent Soho. A hybrid of Nirvana meets Smashing Pumpkins, the sound has venom and festival-esque magnetism. First single *Jesus Stole My Girlfriend* seals the deal, a manic song with swagger and an irresistibly beefy chorus that smacks you in the ears. Frontman Luke Boerdam's vocals swing from sedate drawl to primal scream in other feisty rockers *Son of Sam* and *Muscle Junkie*. Then there's the light and shade of *Slippery Tongue* and haunting balladry of *Paper Planes*. Soho rocks.

Scott Podmore