The Beths // Straight Line Was A Lie

The Beths know the futility of straight lines. This emotional vertigo not only serves as the primary theme on the New Zealand indie heroes' fourth album *Straight Line Was A Lie* (their first for new label ANTI-), but The Beths have refashioned this state of being into something more reassuring. "Linear progression is an illusion," lead singer and songwriter Elizabeth Stokes says of the album. "What life really is is maintenance. But you can find meaning in the maintenance."

The path from The Beths' critically celebrated and year-end-list-topping 2022 LP *Expert In A Dying Field* to *Straight Line Was A Lie*, written in Los Angeles and recorded in the band's hometown of Auckland, was also anything but straightforward. For the first time, Stokes was struggling to write new songs beyond fragments she'd recorded on her phone. She'd recently started taking an SSRI, which on one hand made her feel like she could "fix" everything broken in her life, from her mental and physical health to fraught family dynamics. At the same time, writing wasn't coming as easily as it had before. "I was kind of dealing with a new brain, and I feel like I write very instinctually," she says. "It was kind of like my instincts were just a little different, because they weren't as panicky."

Stokes and her longtime Beths bandmate, guitarist, and creative partner Jonathan Pearce responded by breaking down the typical Beths writing process. For inspiration, they read Stephen King's *On Writing*, *How Big Things Get Done* by Bent Flyvbjerg and Dan Gardner, and *Working* by Robert A. Caro. Liz broke out a Remington typewriter – a birthday gift from Beths bassist Benjamin Sinclair. Every morning, during an extended retreat to Los Angeles, she wrote 10 pages' worth of material — mostly streams of consciousness. Stokes and Pearce also leaned heavily into LA's singular creative atmosphere, watched Criterion classics from Kurosawa, and listened to Drive-By Truckers, The Go-Go's, and Olivia Rodrigo. Opening themselves up to a wave of creative input, plus Stokes' free-flowing writing routine, proved therapeutic. "It was forcing me to look at stuff that I didn't want to look at," Stokes says. "In the past, in my memories. Things I normally don't like to think about or I'm scared to look at, I'm putting them down on paper and thinking about them, addressing them."

Since Stokes, Pearce, and Sinclair started playing together (Tristan Deck joined in 2019), the four-piece have steadily risen through the indie-rock ranks, opening for household name acts like Pixies, The Breeders, The Postal Service, and Death Cab For Cutie; and they've garnered significant praise from pop and indie-adjacent heroes like Phoebe Bridgers, not to mention tastemaking outlets like Pitchfork and Rolling Stone. Over the last six years, The Beths have appeared at major international festivals, from Primavera Sound to Newport Folk Festival and Bonnaroo, and *Expert In A Dying Field* has earned millions of global streams since its release in 2022.

Already a celebrated lyricist, Stokes has long impressed fans and critics with wryly knowing song titles like "Future Me Hates Me" and "Expert In A Dying Field" — catchy, instant-classic turns of phrase that capture the personal and ladder up to the universal. But Stokes' intentional deconstruction and rebuild of her relationship to writing has resulted in a total renewal. Her songwriting has achieved startling new

depths of insight and vulnerability, making *Straight Line Was A Lie* the most sharply observant, truthful, and poetic Beths project to date.

It's immediately clear how far inward Stokes looked on the stripped-down, intensely personal "Mother Pray For Me." Over plaintive finger-picked guitar, Stokes' voice is childlike in its wistful plea for connection. "I cried the whole time writing it," Stokes says. "It's not really about her, it's about me — what I hope our relationship is, what I think it is, what it maybe actually is, and what I can or can't expect out of it."

Cementing the album's aharmonic theme is a loopy analog clock design by Lily Paris West, who also provided the artwork for 2022's *Expert In A Dying Field*. Paris' "wonky clock" plays right into The Beths' notion of nonlinear progression and imperfect physical perfection. "But the clock is always back in the same place, and it's kind of a broken machine as well," Stokes says. "My body and brain are these complex, complicated, and amazing things."

Meanwhile, fans who have followed The Beths' Flying Nun-shaped jangle-rock since their 2018 debut *Future Me Hates Me* will fall in love at first listen with the band's latest title track. A clear-eyed, hook-stacked mission statement for The Beths' new chapter, "Straight Line Was A Lie" is an instant anthem with a punchy, Salad Boys-inspired sing-along chorus about non-linear progression: *I thought I was getting better/ But I'm back to where I started/ And the straight line was a circle/ Yeah, the straight line was a lie*. "We were right in the middle of writing the album, and I was metabolizing everything," Stokes says of the album's title track. "I had the idea that I was making progress in my life and that I was going to be able to fix everything. Like, this is great. Things have been really dark, but I can keep working and then I'll be in this good place. And it just felt like this rude awakening. It's not like then everything went really terrible, but it just wasn't the reality."

While Stokes felt a kind of relief from taking SSRIs, she articulates the emotional trade offs on "No Joy," which thunders in with Deck's vigorous percussion and drops another classic Beths soundbite: *This year's gonna kill me/ Gonna kill me*. Ironically, though, the stress Stokes sings about can't touch her, thanks to her pharmaceutical regimen. She wants the feeling back. "It's about anhedonia, which, paradoxically, was there both in the worst parts of depression, and then also when I was feeling pretty numb on the SSRI," Stokes says. "It wasn't that I was sad. It was just that I didn't like the things that I liked. I wasn't getting joy from them. It's very literal."

Stokes takes a more abstract approach to health and healing on the cheery "Metal," where she grapples with dueling diagnoses of Grave's and Thyroid Eye Disease and finds inspiration from Ed Yong's book on animal senses, *An Immense World*. Aside from its metaphorical lyrics (Stokes admits she's more prone to writing literally) "Metal" finds The Beths at their peak, with its effortless meld of upbeat, sugar-rushing jangle-rock underpinning layers of pensive anxiety and optimism. "I was having all of these coexisting thoughts — feeling like my body's like a machine that's breaking down and feeling really amazed that it exists at all," she says. "I was like, the human body is amazing. Life is amazing."

Medium-length bio:

The Beths know the futility of straight lines. Existential vertigo not only serves as the primary theme on the New Zealand indie heroes' fourth album *Straight Line Was A Lie* (their first for new label ANTI-), but the band has refashioned it into something much more reassuring. "Linear progression is an illusion," lead singer and songwriter Elizabeth Stokes says of the album, whose artwork by Lily Paris West (returning from designing 2022's *Expert In A Dying Field*) portrays a loopy, surrealist analog clock. "What life really is is maintenance. But you can find meaning in the maintenance."

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Stokes and Pearce responded by breaking down the typical Beths writing process. For inspiration, they read Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, *How Big Things Get Done* by Bent Flyvbjerg and Dan Gardner, and *Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing* by *The Power Broker* author Robert A. Caro. Liz broke out a Remington typewriter – a birthday gift from Beths bassist Benjamin Sinclair. Every morning, during an extended retreat to Los Angeles, she wrote 10 pages' worth of material — mostly streams of consciousness. Stokes and Pearce leaned heavily into LA's singular creative atmosphere, watched Criterion classics from Kurosawa, and listened to Drive-By Truckers, The Go-Go's, and Olivia Rodrigo. Opening themselves up to a wave of creative input, plus Stokes' free-flowing writing routine, proved incredibly therapeutic. "It was forcing me to look at stuff that I didn't want to look at," Stokes says. "In the past, in my memories. Things I normally don't like to think about or I'm scared to look at, I'm putting them down on paper and thinking about them, addressing them."

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Stokes has never been one to shy away from candor, but it's immediately clear how far inward she's looked on the stripped-down, intensely personal "Mother Pray For Me." Over plaintive finger-picked

guitar, Stokes' voice is childlike in its wistful plea for connection. "I cried the whole time writing it. It feels like a difficult and very real relationship to write about," Stokes says.

Since Stokes, Pearce, and Sinclair started playing together in high school (Deck joined in 2019), the four-piece have steadily risen through the indie-rock ranks, opening for household name acts like Pixies, The Breeders, and Death Cab For Cutie; and they've garnered significant praise from pop and indie-adjacent heroes like Phoebe Bridgers and Charli XCX, not to mention tastemaking outlets like Pitchfork and Rolling Stone. Over the last six years, The Beths have appeared at major international festivals, from Primavera Sound to SXSW and Pickathon, and *Expert In A Dying Field* has earned millions of global streams since its release in 2022.

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Boilerplate bio:

The Beths know the futility of straight lines. Not only does existential vertigo serve as the primary theme on the New Zealand indie heroes' fourth album *Straight Line Was A Lie* (their first for new label ANTI-), but The Beths — led by longtime musical partners Elizabeth Stokes and Jonathan Pearce — have refashioned it into something reassuring.

Written in Los Angeles and recorded in the band's hometown of Auckland, *Straight Line Was A Lie* picks up where 2022's critically celebrated LP Expert In A Dying Field left off with a fresh batch of jangly, Flying Nun-inspired gems. This time, however, Stokes delves deeper into her psyche to address everything from roundabout progress ("Straight Line Was A Lie") mental and physical health challenges ("Metal," "No Joy") to fraught family dynamics ("Mother Pray For Me").

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