



Inner ear problems mean the prolific **Ryan Adams** prefers to turn the volume down. By **Tim Hume**

QUIET AMERICAN

For the past few years, Ryan Adams, the wildly gifted, perennially under-delivering poster boy of alt-country, has been on a break. Not that anyone would have noticed. Having announced, in early 2009, an indefinite leave of absence from the “soul destroying” music industry, the spiky North Carolina native went on to unearth two records from his vaults last year, one a double album. Releasing 47 new tracks on his year off – including a wilfully niche “sci-fi metal concept album” – did nothing to allay suspicions that Adams’ frenetic rate of production might be a liability. Even diehard fans were left feeling there was occasionally too much Ryan to love.

This month the 36-year-old heralds his return to the studio with the release of *Ashes and Fire*, his 13th album since his solo debut 11 years ago. Forgoing space metal experiments in favour of a stripped-back, country-inflected sound, it reflects the hard-won simplicity of his new lifestyle following

years of largely self-inflicted turmoil. The one-time hellraiser, who used to boast of doing speedballs – a volatile cocktail of cocaine and heroin – on a daily basis, now finds even espresso too rich for his blood. Having abandoned the demi-monde of his adopted New York City, he’s more likely these days to be found hiking in the California mountains with his wife, the pop idol turned Hollywood sweetheart Mandy Moore, about whom, his PR minders are adamant, he will take no questions.

Adams walked away from music because, after more than a decade of near-constant touring, recording and weathering life as an indie celebrity, he needed to make changes. He was burnt out for a number of reasons, chief among them a rare and incurable inner ear condition called Meniere’s disease which had been afflicting his nervous system and threatening his hearing since 2005.

“Symptomatically, it’s f...ing horrible,” he says. “I was in a great amount of pain. There’s quite a bit

of tinnitus that goes with it, which for me plays out like an extremely loud car engine or a screaming siren in my left ear that doesn’t stop for a week. The psychological pain of dealing with that sound is maddening and frustrating. You just want it to f...ing stop, and it doesn’t.”

While he had been sober for a few years, his Meniere’s diagnosis in 2007 required him to expand his clean living regime. He quit smoking, changed his diet and spent eight months exploring hypnotherapy and acupuncture. The new techniques “had a profound impact on the way I live,” he says, allowing him to navigate the unwelcome aural landscape of new and missing sounds.

“I don’t have my middle hearing in my left ear. It’s gone. I have low lows and high highs, but it’s like something’s missing,” he says. “But I trained my mind to not hear the [tinnitus] noise. I trained my mind to not hear what notes were missing out. I learned to focus on the way my hands feel when >>



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I play the guitar, which has always been one of the most comforting feelings of my life. I retrained my mind to take a negative and try to find a positive."

For a while, he says, "I thought I was going to lose my ability to hear completely. And that still is something that could happen. It's like I'm on a journey to see how kind I can be to myself. If I'm doing a sound-check and there's really extreme feedback from a monitor, which happened a couple of times on the last tour, it's painful. There's a real threat there that I could lose tones that are really precious to me now. It isn't like I'm deaf to my own music yet, but I don't hear what I once did. And in

a very f...ed up way, it's very beautiful. I value what I hear so much."

There's something inescapably Ryan Adams about that sentiment, amplifying and dwelling on the mawkishly romantic. A fragile creative ego who has shrouded himself in the flattering imagery of the cowboy poet, he has never been one to shy away from a little myth-making. It's all of a piece with an artistic temperament that some have characterised as near-fatally self-absorbed, and which has made Adams, despite likely being one of the finest songwriters of his generation, a difficult proposition for many of his fans.

Having gained attention in the mid-'90s with alt-country band Whiskeytown, Adams found mainstream success with 2000's *Heartbreaker*, a perfectly realised solo debut which channelled his doomed musical godfather Gram Parsons to the extent of featuring the country rock casualty's old collaborator Emmylou Harris on the album's centrepiece duet. When "New York, New York", the lead single from his follow-up album was released on September 11, 2001, complete with a video that heavily featured the World Trade Centre towers, Adams found he had accidentally penned a torch-song for a nation in mourning. Hailed by Elton John as the "Fabulous One", his tunes entered the Great American Songbook; "When the Stars Go Blue" was covered many times by mainstream country acts, and became an *American Idol* staple.

But from the early '00s onwards, there have been diminishing returns. For every "Strawberry Wine" – an achingly gorgeous ballad from *29*, a song cycle imagining his own suicide – Adams might produce half a dozen polished, professional but ultimately unmemorable adult-contemporary numbers that don't so much stir the listener, as remind them why his albums are sold in Starbucks. Questions are repeatedly raised about Adams' critical filter: *29* was the third album he released in 2005 alone.

Increasingly, too, his musical efforts became overshadowed by his behaviour. Adams became known as the thin-skinned brat who left a rant on the answerphone of a critic (who subsequently leaked it on the web). He feuded constantly with his record label Lost Highway, an outfit generally known as an artist-friendly operation. (*Ashes and Fire* is being released on his own label, Pax-Am.)

Most notoriously, he had an onstage meltdown when a fan at a Nashville show heckled that he should play Canadian rocker Bryan Adams' "Summer of '69". The incident, or at least the mockery it earned him, clearly left a mark: seven years later he alluded to the episode in a blogpost announcing his break from music, lamenting the way "people yell at you like you were in a circus", how the industry had left him "a punchline and a footnote".

Adams' performances in New Zealand have not

been immune from trouble. A prickly appearance in Auckland in 2007 left at least one fan feeling like they "kind of hated him". But these displays, at least in recent years, had a lot to do with Meniere's, according to Adams, who partly blames the condition for his second, "terrible" Auckland show in 2009. "I was in great, great pain. I was having terrible Meniere's spells and the plane ride devastated me. [At the venue,] the air-conditioning had stopped and... I was having dizzy spells and it was really miserable. I was ready to surrender to what was happening to me."

His deteriorating relationship with the Cardinals – who, since the split with Adams, have been collaborating with New Zealand's Gin Wigmore – only compounded the problem. "For them to not understand or not know how to help – that's a very frustrating thing to go through, for me and for them."

"Musical differences" also reared their head. "By the end, there was just such a focus on it being loud. I just didn't want to play like that any more and that idea wasn't shared by my band-mates. I was trying to make it work with the wrong partner."

An incurable condition, a fractured musical partnership: Adams has been through the fire. But have the changes in his life led to changes in his music? On the evidence of *Ashes and Fire*, getting on top of his disease and having shorn himself from an unhappy musical relationship has left him sounding more himself than ever.

"This album is so simply me, and so simply what I do," he says. "I'm really happy and proud to be doing the stuff I'm doing. I don't equate volume with the ability to rock or to write something wonderful."

He feels no trepidation about re-entering the musical fold, he says. Nor has the threat of further hearing loss prompted him to think about ramping up his already high rate of musical output. "It's better to be in the moment and be happy about what I'm doing. My work has always been about quality over quantity, regardless of the way that quantity has been perceived by others," he says. "For me, all of it was created out of pure joy. I want to stay on that side of the street."

His condition has made him appreciate music more, he says, then reconsiders. "I always have thought," he says. "I could never say I took it for granted. If I should lose my hearing next year, I will have used it so much... I wouldn't have any regrets. I wouldn't be able to say, 'Well, I didn't spend that year making too many songs!'"

Then Adams laughs at himself. There's unconfirmed talk of an Australasian tour next year, which might provide the best measure of whether the deep changes the singer-songwriter claims to have undergone have taken root. The signs are promising. "I've ended up with a much better lease on life," he says. "I don't feel bad all the time any more."