DORK

DOWN WITH BORING.

ISSUE 75 · APRIL 2023 · READDORK.COM



Arlo Parks


A FESTIVAL REPUBLIC PRESENTATION
boygenius
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GUNNERSBURY PARK, LONDON
PLUS SPECIAL GUESTS
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Ethel Cain
AND MORE TO BE ANNOUNCED
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Ethel Cain
EXTRA DATE ADDED DUE TO PHENOMENAL DEMAND
WEDNESDAY 23 AUGUST 2023
THE PIECE HALL, HALIFAX
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Hiya, Dear Reader.

Spring is apparently about to... spring(?!), so it's only fitting we have a suitably bouncy new issue to brighten things up. We do love to be seasonal, after all.

We've got three awesome cover stars - current queen of pop nonsense Sabrina Carpenter has had a fun few weeks (we'll never look at the BBC in quite the same way again). Last year's 'Emails I Can't Send' fast became a standout fave. With UK dates planned for this summer, she's a megastar on a meteoric rise.

Talking about fast tracks to the top, Arlo Parks has certainly been on one since her last Dork cover. After her debut album scooped up practically every award going, follow-up 'My Soft Machine' is quickly appearing on the horizon. A singular talent at the top of her game, we're delighted to have her back this month.

And if we're talking returning heroes, you don't get much more returning or heroic than Black Honey. Starring alongside Dream Wife on the front of issue 4, they're finally back for number 75. New album 'A Fistful of Peaches' is their best to date - one not to miss.



'Editor'
@stephenackroyd

THIS MONTH.

#75. APRIL 2023.



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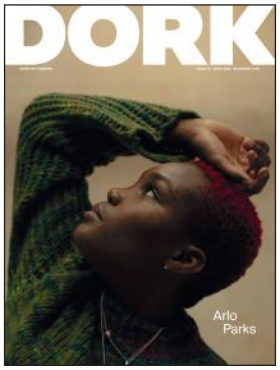
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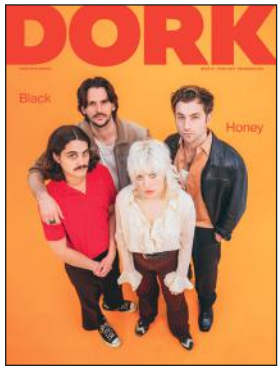
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INTRO.

THE BEATING HEART OF POP NONSENSE.



DORK ON



TOUR

As the **Dork Hype List Tour 2023** - featuring one of the best new live bands on the planet, **Priestgate** - hits London, we're there to report on all the action.



→ WE KNOW A FAIR BIT ABOUT HYPE, OKAY DEAR READER? A pretty core part of everything that is Dork. Enter the first-ever Dork Hype List Tour, headlined by one of the most exciting live bands in new music: Priestgate. After plenty of sold-out dates and eye-popping moments already, when the band roll into London with Bleach Lab and Cucamaras, the future proves it's well and truly here to take over. Take notes while you can.

Openers Cucamaras don't wait around for polite plaudits. Lighting into a quick-fire set that builds from the foundations of bands such as Do Nothing, Yard Act and Fontaines D.C. but with their own unique voice and twist, it's a tight explosion you can't help but be engulfed in. Trading vocals amongst themselves and whipping up a frenzy, there's already the touch of a band whose moment is coming very soon indeed. 'Winner's Chapel' is a prime example, furious and feverish in equal measure. From tonight's evidence, they're a band stamping their authority on the next wave of alternative guitar music.

Bleach Lab manage to do what most bands can only dream of. They transform a room into their own unravelling tapestry of dreamy lifts powered by crushing vulnerability. The fact they are but a few EPs in makes it even more astonishing. Commanding the stage, it's a lush and spiralling twist that has you transfixed – whether it's 'Obviously' and cuts from latest EP 'If You Only Feel It Once' such as 'Pale Shade Of Blue' and 'If You Only Feel It Once', or stunning early favourite 'Real Thing'. Raw and all-encompassing, they're the perfect hot water bottle on the coldest of nights.

When we say Priestgate are the new band you need to see live, we mean it. Heart on their sleeves doesn't do it justice; it practically pours from every sound and move they make – both thriving in chaos but also reaching for something deeper. Led by the magnetic presence of singer Rob Schofield, their biggest headline moment to date is wrapped in everything that makes them so essential.

The whirling 'By The Door' and the dream-punk spins of 'Bedtime Story' and 'Credits' are but two shades of an ever-evolving force that feels primed to take on the world. Whether it's scorching across the stage with the direct chomp of 'Eyes Closed For The Winter' or the rapturously received punch of early cut 'Summ(air)', there's a passion that simply can't be refused.

Yet underneath the thrilling flings and flights of a band with the ferocity to knock down buildings is a vital and vulnerable beating pop heart. It's the tangible core that links everything together, from the show to the songs to the sounds to the stages. New EP 'One Shade Darker' showcases that in razor-sharp fashion – the firecracker 'Some Things Never Change' and the bop-topped 'White Shirt' are effortless in their charm, signalling a band itching to show the world how immediate things are about to get. Yet it's the unnamed closing track tonight where Priestgate shoot even bigger. A stripped opening stops the packed Colours Hoxton in its tracks before unravelling into a post-rock anthem of the highest order. It's Priestgate commanding their own story, and what a story it's set to be. ■











Words: **Jamie Muir.** Photos: **Rosie Sco / Jamie MacMillan.**

RITUAL UNION
BRISTOL

SATURDAY 25TH MARCH 2023

Porridge Radio

ALASKALASKA • Athens 04 • Buzzard Buzzard Buzzard • CIEL
Cloth • Ead Wood • Egyptian Blue • Gold Baby • Heavy Lungs
Holy Youth Movement • Japanese Television • Jemima Coulter • Jerkcurb
Kiran Leonard • Lifter • Lime Garden • Maruja • Melin Melyn
Milo's Planes • Naima Bock • Pale Blue Eyes • Panic Shack • Pem
Preen • Rozi Plain • Scalping • Tapir! • The Orielles
TRAAMS • Try Me • Tummyache • TVAM • Vanity Fairy • Vegas Water Taxi
• Aftershow DJ sets from Big Jeff & The Orielles •

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JOHN • Sniffany And The Nits • Baba Ali • The Tubs
Lawi Anywar • Vernon Jane • BENZO QUEEN • Plastic Estate • The Rothmans

IN COLLABORATION WITH SPINNY NIGHTS

Biped • Mermaid Chunky • Robbie & Mona • Tony Njoku
Algernon Cornelius • BUFFEE • Crimewave • Me, Charles • Irish Mellow • Minas

SWX • Rough Trade • Strange Brew • Dareshack
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BLACK HONEY

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25.03 NORWICH	ARTS CENTRE	04.04 MANCHESTER	GORILLA
26.03 BIRMINGHAM	02 ACADEMY2	05.04 NEWCASTLE	UNIVERSITY
28.03 EXETER	CAVERN	06.04 GLASGOW	CLASSIC GRAND
29.03 BRISTOL	THEKLA	08.04 LIVERPOOL	DISTRICT
31.03 BRIGHTON	CHALK	09.04 STOKE	SUGARMILL
01.04 NOTTINGHAM	RESCUE ROOMS	11.04 SOUTHEND	CHINNERYS
		12.04 LONDON	KOKO



BY ARRANGEMENT WITH X-RAY

Peter Doherty

The Battered SongBook Tour



Tue 18 Apr
Glasgow SWG3
Wed 19 Apr
Stockton on Tees KU Bar
Fri 21 Apr
Newcastle Riverside
Sat 22 Apr
Lancaster Kanteena
Sun 23 Apr
Hull The Welly Club
Mon 24 Apr
Norwich The Waterfront
Wed 26 Apr
Manchester 02 Ritz



Thu 27 Apr
Liverpool The Church Anfield
Sat 29 Apr
Bristol 02 Academy
Sun 30 Apr
Falmouth Princess Pavillion
Tue 02 May
Oxford 02 Academy
Wed 03 May
Sheffield 02 Academy
Thu 04 May
Birmingham 02 Institute
Fri 05 May
London Royal Albert Hall



by arrangement with primary talent international



black lips

UK TOUR 2023

25|04	LONDON	HEAVEN
26|04	BRIGHTON	PATTERNS
28|04	MANCHESTER	SOUR GRAPES
29|04	EDINBURGH	STAG & DAGGER
30|04	GLASGOW	STAG & DAGGER
01|05	BIRKENHEAD	FUTUREYARD

BY ARRANGEMENT WITH UNITED TALENT AGENCY



M83

EXTRA DATE ADDED
FINAL TICKETS AVAILABLE

Wednesday 28 June
& Thursday 29 June
Roundhouse London

by arrangement with X-ray

Words: **Finlay Holden.** Photo: **Daniel Topete.**

BLONDAI

> "When you're young, you feel like you're the only one struggling to understand your emotions"
>
> **BLONDSHELL**

➔ It's been a long journey for **Blondshell**, aka **Sabrina Teitelbaum**. Moving to Los Angeles for music school in 2015, she honed her craft with USC's Pop Program, using the tools she picked up there to pursue her passion for alt-rock.

Despite quickly launching into debut album territory, Blondshell is a project that Sabrina Teitelbaum has been leading up to her entire life. Following a potent period of self-growth, the refined songwriter details her switch-up from pop hopeful to indie trailblazer.

Growing up in Manhattan and living in a world dominated by radio pop, Sabrina always preferred to spend her listening time on acts like The Rolling Stones and The National, with Lorde and Lana Del Rey making later appearances too. It seems that two genres – pop and indie-rock – would come to define her musical journey for the next decade or so, with the 25-year-old only now able to accurately position these subcultures in a place that works for her.

"I think pop music is cool; it just ended up not being the most authentic thing for me," she states, directly alluding to her recently concluded BAUM project. Despite building momentum in 2020 and even finishing up a debut EP release, some quiet self-reflection soon shone a light on the fact that this pop pursuit was never truly aligned with Sabrina's most genuine path, even if she shed blood, sweat and tears trying to chase that dream.

"I wasn't a quiet indie kid growing up," she adds: "I didn't go to a school or see many places where people were making music, so it became a thing just for me and not something I tended to connect with other people over. That was important because I did socialise a lot, and I was outgoing, so it was important to develop my relationship with myself by exploring music alone. It provided an isolated space to learn more about who I am."

"Music is definitely the way I express myself best because it's what I'm used to doing," Sabrina continues. "I've always used songs to say things that I wouldn't want to bring up in conversation." This is something you can hear quite precisely in the frustration and rejection of 'Olympus', the track which birthed Blondshell in a sudden blaze of fury – written in complete isolation with no thought to its potential, the song immediately set a marker for future intent.

"It kind of freaked me out because I was like, 'oh no, I'm going to have to rethink this whole music thing'," she recalls of the cataclysmic event. "I grew up listening to indie, and that's everything I liked, but it didn't compute that I had become an indie person making pop music."

"It was a scary process, but I tried to pursue it very gradually," she says of what happened next; the forging of a new creative identity, a whole new discography, all of which was never pre-planned or overly thought through. "There was no pressure on myself to make something. It was a project I never intended to release, and I can hear myself in that space when I listen to the songs. I wasn't thinking, is anyone going to like this? What do people want to hear? Instead, I was focused on: what do I want to say? People connect to peeking through that intimate window of my life rather than me having to pull them in by force; they can tell when you're doing that."

Answering those difficult questions proved to be a hard-fought but entirely rewarding process, which you can recognise in the fine lyricisms of Blondshell's self-titled nine-track LP. It's a stunningly cohesive debut stacked with cutting highlights, and one so formidable that its formidable gut-punch of a tracklist has taken many by surprise.

"Somebody came to my show in New York, and I heard them say: 'wow, she came out of nowhere'," Sabrina recalls of her recent headline tour. "No. I have been working for years and years and years. When I was 16, that's when Lorde's first album came out, and she won all these Grammys and became the biggest thing in the world. That's when I realised: I want to do this as a job too."

"She was, is, my age. I started to feel this time pressure – the media tells me that as I get older, my chances of doing this as a job get smaller and smaller. I've been trying to figure it all out for a long time: how I can say what I want to say, what I want my name to be, how to perform; those things don't come overnight."

Although the music industry is certainly one that seems to perpetually pivot towards ever-younger artists, this singer-songwriter maintains a sense of optimism that people are learning to pay more attention to the work that demands it. "Somebody like Caroline Polacheck has been working for years but didn't find her mainstream success until she was in her 30s. Things are changing. It's an unfair expectation that people are supposed to know who they are by 25. I couldn't have written any of these songs when I was 18 because I simply didn't know who I was."

It was a pandemic-prompted period of growth that has enabled Sabrina to get comfortable being uncomfortable within the Blondshell persona – specifically, a deep-dive into the world of female-penned memoirs took charge of a confidence-building journey. "It's such an act of confidence to write an entire book about yourself and think it's important enough for people to care about what you have to say," she notes. "It's not like a song where you're asking someone to listen for three minutes; putting out a memoir is asking someone to spend hours of their life to hear about yours. Reading essays and books like that where women discuss their experiences without minimising it was important for me. It's really hard to not minimise your own emotions; I grew up doing that at every opportunity and have had to learn not to.

Now that her creative voice is no longer stifled by her own doubt and trepidation, Sabrina is able to offer a viewpoint of heightened intimacy; smart yet accessible lyricism dance over a stormy sonic palette driven by simmering guitar strings and a clear sense of melody. Formed alongside close collaborator Yves Rothman (Yves Tumor, Girlpool, Porches), the album's soundscapes reach for the clouds while keeping the focus on gritty but eloquent writing.

As well as production duties, Yves helped to instil a sense of confidence in this new direction, bringing out the emotion of each track while helping to shape up the bigger Blondshell picture. Despite often being surrounded by a wealth of talent – schoolmate Blu DeTiger and best friend NoSo are but two examples – this was the first time Sabrina felt truly seen and supported creatively.

Reflecting on past efforts, she shares: "When I was doing pop music, it was really piecemeal; I'd do a writing session with one person, then go into a recording session with another person. I was never able to get to know people and have them get to know me while I was rotating between collaborators constantly. It's so much easier building that trust rather than bashing out a song in 12 hours for the paycheck."

Trust – with herself, her collaborators, and her audience – is perhaps a defining aspect of Blondshell. Sabrina trusts herself to be honest and candid and has faith that those listening might find respite in her world. She offers a vulnerable craving for emotional intimacy on 'Kiss City' and 'Sepsis' declares a baseline need for better treatment, while live favourite 'Salad' empowers her to embrace her fury. "I grew up feeling that anger needs to be squashed down inside, so to be on a stage and have people applaud my anger is very healing."

'Blondshell' tells the story of a woman discovering a new person, one whom Sabrina never expected to see in a mirror, one she's stopped running away from and has put in the work to foster the development of. It is a record that will forever hold a unique bond with her mental state, but more importantly, it holds the potential to inspire the same realisations in others.

"I always had the hope that things can get better, and I still do, so I hope that this music has the power to help people, even if it's just them recognising: I feel that way too; I'm not the only one," she concludes. "When you're young, you feel like you're the only one struggling to understand your emotions, but by continuing to be honest not only about things I'm proud of but also as things I'm ashamed of or embarrassed by, I can hopefully show that we're all on the same path." ■ **Blondshell's self-titled debut album is out 7th April.**



SELF-SABOTAGE

➔ We don't care how good **Waterparks'** new album 'INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY' is, **Awsten Knight**. If you come for fish and chips, you're on the shitlist.

A few minutes into our chat with Waterparks and we're starting to feel nauseous. It's nothing that effervescent frontman Awsten Knight has said or done, and those gentle souls of drummer Otto Wood and guitarist Geoff Wigington are incapable of making us feel poorly. It's more that Awsten has been walking around his home in circles with us tagging along on Zoom for a while now. We've already been given a glimpse into his bathroom, which for *reasons* was also doubling up as a home cinema and where he was mid-tidy up when we joined him.

The band, fresh home after their latest tour (this one in support of You Me At Six), are already launching themselves into the next era while also catching up on their chores as Geoff and Otto join us from their respective cars a little later. They promise it's not because they just miss life on the road, but we're unsure if we believe them. "Are you guys sitting in the same car?" asks Awsten out of concern. "Have you just tilted the cameras at each other?" They're not, and they haven't. Geoff is doing the very rock and roll task of getting his windshield fixed, while Otto is "tidying" and spelling out the letters "S, H, I, T" in case he offends anyone.

'INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY', album number five from the Houston trio, as well as admirably keeping up their dedication to naming releases in alphabetical order, sees Awsten dig further into the recesses of his mind to shake out some more colourful (his hair is red this time, colour fans) genre-blurred anthems. As we chat, he is still in tour recovery mode but thriving in his favourite time of any release - the bit before anyone can actually hear it and buy it.

"This is the BEST TIME for it," he says excitedly. "Honestly, I put out the songs because we have to, and that's just how creativity and capitalism works and shit. You have to put it out... But honestly, my favourite part is just demoing it and recording it. When I put it out, I kinda feel sad."

Life since lockdown has been fairly manic. Headline tours here and at home, as well as that huge support tour with YMA6 have followed, the band whirling from zero to full speed in an instant. For a band that bind with their community so well, it's been everything - even if they do admit to some exhaustion, something that Geoff puts down to just being back on the road after being cooped up for all that time. Awsten confides that it all felt a bit scary, meanwhile.

"Dude, I'm a germaphobe," he says, "Especially while we're out, because if I get ill... I've heard me sick on YouTube before. I'm like, if you're out there doing whatever outside the bus until 2am, and you get sick, and then you go check my mic, you're gonna fuck me up. And no one's gonna believe that I got sick; it's just gonna be like, 'dang, he can't do that live'."

"A lot of it is the social anxiety, too," says Geoff. "You don't know if you're acting correctly. For me, not being around people for so long and then being thrown into the mix of it can be a bit anxiety driving."

Awsten just reckons Geoff forgot how to talk, but even for the frontman, one venue, in particular, took him by surprise. "I did NOT know the disparity of how overwhelming Ally Pally could be," he laughs. "I know it's fucking crazy, but dude! I didn't see the room beforehand; we didn't soundcheck. I didn't go out there and scope it out. I was like, fuck it... I'm just gonna go in there, and when I step out, I'm gonna feel something."

Judging from his expression as he details exactly what he did feel when he stepped out in front of about 10,000 fans, that was somewhere in between abject terror and realising he'd probably quite like to visit the bathroom again one more time.

If you imagine Waterparks as a band that come to life on the road, embracing each country's fans with open arms and diving headfirst into the culinary treats of each nation, then you're half right - at least when it comes to the UK. Because Awsten's got some serious (but good-natured) beef when it comes to our food. "What was patient zero?" asks Otto when the subject comes up (because, to be fair, we asked him what his problem was). "Patient zero was fish and chips!" spits Awsten. "Stupidest fucking food ever. And I was mad, because I was just like, 'they love this, this is their shit, this is their number one'. And I tried it, and I was like, THIS?"

We are talking on the brink of 'INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY' coming out, so it's no surprise that spirits are so high in the band. It's an exciting time - but one that's usually laced with a sense that the frontman, in particular, is already looking forward to what's next. This time, unusually for him, there is nothing left in the vault - he counts 99 different edits and demos that somehow got whittled down to a lean 11 tracks on the record, but that's it. The sprawling explosion of ideas and influences that made up 'GREATEST HITS' has been deliberately pared back this time round, Awsten describing it as a conscious decision.

"Normally, I don't let the idea of doing something differently dictate stuff too much as far as how much is going on a record," he explains. "But I felt like a lot of 'GREATEST HITS' was overlooked. I loved all the songs, but it was all so under-appreciated that I was like, I'm not gonna do that shit again. Now I know what I can expect them to reasonably consume."

He reels off what some of his favourite tracks were and what he loved about them, it clearly still being a record that he loves - despite saying earlier that the moment a record is out, he's done with it.

"Making music is just for me," he says. "It's not like the songs go away. I can make a fucking album right now that's 200 songs long, and just give it to myself. So this time, I was just gonna make sure that EVERYTHING on here is appreciated. I'm gonna make sure that the quality is up HERE, the fucking best." ■ **Waterparks' album 'INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY' is out 14th April. Read the full interview in the April 2023 issue of Upset.**

> **"Patient zero was fish and chips! Stupidest fucking food ever"**
>
> **AWSTEN KNIGHT**



death cab for cutie

asphalt meadows tour

- uk/ie 2023 -



with special guest
slow pulp

march

sat 18	nottingham	rock city
sun 19	dublin	bord gais theatre
tue 21	birmingham	o2 institute
wed 22	edinburgh	usher hall
thu 23	gateshead	sage
sat 25	manchester	apollo
mon 27	brighton	dome
	extra show added	
tue 28	london	roundhouse
wed 29	london	royal albert hall

by arrangement with caa

THE CAT EMPIRE

- UK TOUR 2023 -

PLUS SPECIAL GUEST
TAY OSKEE

SOLD OUT	CAMBRIDGE Junction
Mar 29	LONDON O2 Forum Kentish Town
Mar 30	BOURNEMOUTH O2 Academy
SOLD OUT	BRISTOL Marble Factory
Apr 02	COVENTRY HMV Empire
Apr 04	LEEDS Beckett Students Union
Apr 05	GLASGOW QMU
Apr 06	MANCHESTER O2 Ritz

by arrangement with UTA

TEENAGE FANCLUB

PLUS SPECIAL GUESTS



FRI 03	BELFAST	QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY MANDELA HALL
SUN 05	GLASGOW	TRAMWAY THEATRE
MON 06	ABERDEEN	TIVOLI THEATRE
TUE 07	EDINBURGH	ASSEMBLY ROOMS
WED 08	LEEDS	BRUDENELL
THU 09	GATESHEAD	SAGE HALL 2
SAT 11	MANCHESTER	RNCM THEATRE
SUN 12	SHEFFIELD	LEADMILL
MON 13	BATH	KOMEDIA
TUE 14	BIRMINGHAM	TOWN HALL
FRI 17	LONDON	EARTH
SAT 18	LONDON	EARTH

ALL VENUES SEATED EXCEPT LEEDS BRUDENELL

BY ARRANGEMENT WITH X-RAY

HILLTOP HOODS

UK / EUROPE TOUR 2023

17/06
• LONDON • ROUNDHOUSE •
20/06
• GLASGOW • THE GARAGE •
21/06
• MANCHESTER • ACADEMY 2 •

BY ARRANGEMENT WITH X-RAY

NEW ERA

Words: **Stephen Ackroyd.** Photo: **Ronan Park.**

→ Returning with their first new material since 2021, **Lucia & The Best Boys** are back(!), back(!!), and-indeed-BACK(!!!) with a really quite remarkable new track 'When You Dress Up'.

Lucia & The Best Boys is marking the beginning of a new era. That's the marker set down by her just-dropped new single 'When You Dress Up'. The track is the first taste of an upcoming debut album, set for release later this year via Communion Records – a powerful anthem that emphasises the empowering energy of womanhood and rejects the male gaze. It's a left turn that feels both important and visceral. Textured, intelligent pop music that elevates itself above the rank and file.

"It's been 2 and a half years since I last put out music," offers Lucia, aware there's been a bit of a gap since we last heard something on record. "I wanted this to be the first track because there is a familiar Lucia & The Best Boys energy to it, but there is also a glimpse of something bigger and of what's to come, and I want people to have that mystery. "

That mystery mostly comes from high expectations and the unknown that lies beyond – a track like this was always going to kick up a bit of excitement. "My songwriting is always evolving, which I feel it's the same for most writers," she muses, when asked about the song. "We haven't played many shows over the last three years, so I spent that time putting everything into writing and recording, and all of it came to fruition pretty naturally. As much as this all feels new there is still a very distinctive homage to songs we have released in the past."

While that's true, there's something extra special about 'When You Dress Up' – a song about "not taking shit, knowing you're worth, and never letting a man suppress your authenticity". As Lucia puts it herself, "most times it is purely because they are jealous of your power."

She's got a point. In the time since 2021's 'The State Of Things', Lucia has been more than busy. Catching the eye of legendary fashion house Alexander McQueen, becoming creative director Sarah Burton's recent muse and even closing their recent flagship runway show at London Fashion Week, seeing first-hand the thought and time that goes into making a collection has influenced her approach.

"This has definitely made me even more passionate about the visual creative process," she explains. "I'm sure there are times in the past where I have found it hard not to compare myself or music to others, but I feel like this world in which I'm about to show is nothing but true to me."

It's one showcased by the video that comes alongside the track. Created by Lucia and director Rianne White, it's described as a love letter to embracing every version of ourselves.

"I feel like the video elevates the meaning behind the song," she reveals. "I wanted it to be powerful but also vulnerable, relatable and personal. It's about truly embracing every version of yourself. The design is inspired by Scottish roots and folklore, something I've become more passionate about as I have got older and I've found this seeping into my music in more than one way. It's also something [set designer] Furmaan uses as inspiration for their own works. Rianne and Furmaan always manage to capture my ideas so magically, and it's really changed a lot for me having friends and creatives around who truly understand what your end goal is."

When it comes to having creatives around to inspire, you don't get much better than the mighty Wolf Alice. Perhaps the current holders of the Britain's Best Band trophy, Lucia & The Best Boys spent a good stint of time on the road with the quartet as they toured their last full-length 'Blue Weekend'.

"One thing I always loved about them even before that tour was how flexible they can be as a band," Lucia enthuses. "They can play a big pop hit, then they can perform a huge rock song with in-your-face guitar solos, then they can perform an extremely vulnerable acoustic one right after it, and it will always still feel very defined. I feel like this is something I have always done too because it felt unnatural pigeonholing myself to one thing, but to see them execute that so well and timelessly really gave me more confidence to not be afraid of swaying into different genres."

The comparison isn't a far-fetched one – that same organic, brilliant creative vigour shines bright through 'When You Dress Up'. Modern music that sets its own rules, it begs the question – what comes next?

"We spent 4 weeks at Blackbay studios up on Bernera, a little island just off of Stornoway in the north of Scotland," Lucia teases. "I don't think there was a more perfect place to bring everything to life and I definitely think that it helped to shape the sound of what's coming this year."

There's that mystery again. As Lucia & The Best Boys crack open the door on that debut album, 'When You Dress Up' suggests every stolen peek inside is going to be well worth the wait. ■



> **This has definitely made me even more passionate about the visual creative process"**
>
> **LUCIA & THE BEST BOYS**

PARALLEL LINES

MELODY'S ECHO CHAMBER
WED 15 MAR SOLD OUT
SCALA

ALEX G
THU 23 MAR SOLD OUT
ROUNDHOUSE

A. SAVAGE
TUE 28 MAR
CAMDEN ASSEMBLY

OKAY KAYA
TUE 28 MAR
LAFAYETTE

EGYPTIAN BLUE
WED 29 MAR
OSLO

APRIL
WED 12 APR
FOLKLORE

KAITLYN AURELIA SMITH
SAT 15 APR
KING'S PLACE

KAI BOSCH
THU 20 APR
BERMONDSEY SOCIAL CLUB

NURIA GRAHAM
WED 3 MAY
ST PANCRAS OLD CHURCH

CUMGIRL8
TUE 9 MAY
MOTH CLUB

CARRTOONS
WED 10 MAY
VILLAGE UNDERGROUND

HAWA
WED 10 MAY
CORSICA STUDIOS

BLONDSHELL
WED 24 MAY
MOTH CLUB

FLASHER
TUE 30 MAY
SEBRIGHT ARMS

THE BIG MOON
WED 31 MAY
ROUNDHOUSE

ANDY SHAUF
THU 1 JUNE
HACKNEY EMPIRE

THE NATIONAL
TUE 26 + WED 27 SEP
ALEXANDRA PALACE

BC CAMPLIGHT
THU 23 NOV
O2 SHEPHERD'S BUSH EMPIRE

LANKUM
WED 13 DEC
ROUNDHOUSE

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KOOL KIDS

Words: **Ali Shutler.** Photo: **Jonathan Weiner.**

➜ Rewriting the scene on a mission to be the biggest band on the planet, there's no lack of ambition to **Meet Me @ The Altar**.

If you know anything about Meet Me @ The Altar, you know they want to be the biggest band in the world. And they've got no problem telling you, either.

"Doubt and fear prevent people from taking action, but it's that action that causes change," explains guitarist Téa Campbell. "We've never let anything stop us. We wanted to tour, but no one would give us the opportunity, so we figured out how to book things ourselves." If the trio had been scared, they'd probably still be living in different states and writing songs over the internet.

Instead, they're fresh from an appearance on The Late Show With Stephen Colbert, where their fiery, confident performance of 'Say It (To My Face)' came alongside the announcement of their debut album 'Past // Present // Future'. Even if you don't know anything about Meet Me @ The Altar, those three minutes proved the band really could be the biggest in the world.

"I was expecting to feel overwhelmed, but I just felt really comfortable," says Edith Victoria of their television debut. "I hope we get to do every late-night show, because I want to do it all again."

Meet Me @ the Altar formed in 2015 when Téa reached out to Ada Juarez, after watching one of her drum cover videos on YouTube. The band was completed by Edith in 2017, and despite living in different states, the trio would travel to play scrappy basement shows and recorded a handful of EPs. Things changed in 2020, though, when, as the world went into lockdown due to the pandemic, their single 'Garden' started blowing up online as the pop-punk revival started to take hold.

"I remember that like it was yesterday," starts Téa. "That was the start of seeing everything we knew we would accomplish finally start happening. Even when we were a tiny local band playing to 15 people, we always knew our band was something really special. We always knew we could go far, and we were going to put the work in to go the distance. At that start of lockdown, it felt like the world was catching up to what we already knew." Everything they've achieved since (believe us, it's quite the list) has felt like "another little taste of what we're supposed to be doing."

Alongside acts like De'Wayne and Pinkshift, Meet Me @ the Altar were championed as proof that pop-punk and rock wasn't as white, male and stale as it had been in its noughties heyday. "It was very rewarding," says Edith. "We are one of the best bands to be at the forefront of that, to show that people can look different and making any type of music. At the end of the day, the only thing that matters is that we're taking up space, creating music and existing as human beings. We're proof that things are different this time around, and they can be even better."

Meet Me @ The Altar signed to the iconic Fueled By Ramen shortly after the release of 'Garden', with their 'Model Citizen' EP coming the following year. Then they hit the road hard and saw first-hand that their music was making a difference.

"Because we got our following over COVID, we didn't really see any of our growth beyond numbers on a screen. Now, we've done so many tours and talked to so many people that have told us, 'your music has literally changed my life'," says Téa. Those interactions are the ones that mean the most to the trio. "We get it. We would have felt the exact same way if a band like us had come around when we were growing up. We had always been waiting for something to come along until we realised, 'I guess we're it'."

It wasn't all positive, though. Despite the scene becoming more inclusive, Meet Me @ The Altar were still on the receiving end of sexist, racist, homophobic abuse. "Being women of colour and some of us being gay, people just say the most unnecessary and ridiculous things," explains Edith. They tackle it head-on on 'Past // Present // Future"s spunky lead single 'Say It (To My Face)'.

"I'm a bitch, and my band is an industry plant, least that's what it says on the internet," sings Edith with a knowing smirk before telling the anonymous troll to "run home" to their mom. "Really wish I could stay, gotta fly to LA, play a show at The Wiltern," Edith adds.

"It's very in your face, and I think it'll piss people off, which is great," Edith explains. She believes it'll also make people fall in love with the band "because we're unapologetic about everything. It's definitely a head turner, and we wanted to turn heads."

Everything about 'Past // Present // Future' feels fearless, but that suits Meet Me @ The Altar just fine, who aren't worried about being precious over what they've already created.

"The way I view it, the majority of our fan base doesn't know we exist yet," says Téa, another grand statement before razor-sharp self-awareness. "We are a relatively small band. We've gotten huge opportunities, but as far as streaming and all that stuff, we're a small band, so this is the time for us to take risks."

She's confident existing fans will love the album, but "something we've always talked about throughout our years together as a band is that we can't make music for other people. We have to make music for ourselves, and if we like it, that's what the world gets."

It's different to what's come before "in every single shape and angle," says Ada. "In my humble opinion, no one but Meet Me @ The Altar could have made 'Model Citizen'. No one else could have made this album, either." While 'Model Citizen' was strictly easycore, 'Past // Present // Future' is far more expansive. "We don't want to get trapped in a box," says Téa.

"After people hear this record, I don't think they're going to be surprised by whatever way we decide to go for our next release," says Edith. "Whatever we write next will make sense." ■ **Meet Me @ The Altar's debut album 'Past // Present // Future' is out now. Read the full interview in the March 2023 issue of Upset.**

> **"People just say the most unnecessary and ridiculous things"**
>
> **EDITH VICTORIA**



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IG HOME

Rap wonderkid **ArrDee** is breaking genre confines to show everyone what he's made of.

Words: Martyn Young.



➜ Some new artists have a good start. They get a few minor hits, a ripple of buzz, maybe a fleeting viral moment and a good chunk of critical acclaim. But it's only a select few exceptional artists who truly burst onto the scene with such undeniable impact that they completely change the game. 20-year-old Brighton rapper ArrDee is one of those sensations. His rise has been super swift and super thrilling as he's notched up hit singles and a massive online following making him officially the biggest breakthrough artist of 2022 certified by the Official Charts Company. His debut mixtape 'Pier Pressure' was an introduction that immediately announced him as a UK rapper with the potential to be about more than chart singles, but as he enters 2023, we arrive at a pivotal moment as Riley Davies looks to take ArrDee to a whole new artistic level.

"I think it's fair to say rapid," he begins, reflecting on the past two years of madness. "That's the first word that comes to mind. It's explosive, but also it meant that because of that trajectory into the lane I got I landed in, with big hits and the singles and the charts and radio, we had to stay maintaining that and proving that I could do that. It meant that, to some extent, there weren't a lot of singles that catered towards building a love for me as a person and my artistry. You had 'Pier Pressure', which had glimpses of it, but it meant that there could be people who were a fan of ArrDee 'Flowers' or ArrDee 'Oliver Twist', but they weren't a fan of ArrDee the person. I'm not complaining. I'm very happy I came into the game the way I did so fast, and we had all these hits because it shows that I can do it, but this year for me is definitely about proving my lyricability, my artistry, longevity and credibility."

The first steps towards ArrDee showing a different side to his personality and who he hopes to be as an artist comes in the form of a stunning new single 'Home From My Heart' featuring Cat Burns. A collaboration between two of the most exciting new Gen Z artists in the UK, it feels like it captures a beautiful moment. It's tender and reflective, with an instantly memorable hook that highlights the best of both artists. For ArrDee, it's a long-awaited chance to show what he can really do on a deeper level. "I'm a hundred, million per cent going into a new lane," he says confidently. "It's just evolving and expanding. Growing up, I never wanted to be just a rapper. I always wanted to be an artist. Introducing that side of me and going into that lane feels like a big moment for me. I'm excited."

It's a landmark song for ArrDee in many ways. Showing vulnerability rather than the familiar brash exuberance, it makes sense that it's a track that heralds a new phase after his overwhelming ascent. "It took me a while to get my head around, but the artists that I'm fans of very much humanise themselves, and you buy into their character and personality," he explains. "Everybody has different personas. It would be fairly impossible for me to be 'haha, cheeky chappy, let's all have a party' ArrDee all the time. I'd either get ill, or I'd be pretending. Everyone knows that, and it's good to introduce a different side to me. Not that I'd ever change my personality just for the music, but there's ArrDee, and then there's Riley, and you see glimpses of Riley, and that's quite important to me."

> "I'm a hundred, million per cent going into a new lane"
>
> ARRDEE

Despite putting so much of himself out there emotionally on this track, ArrDee is apprehensive about explicitly stating what the song means to him, preferring to instead leave it open to fans to find their own solace in the heartfelt lyricism. "I don't want to necessarily say what it means to me literally because I want it to be interoperable, but the hook says, 'I've been grinding so hard, and now I'm home from my heart'. It's about life moving fast and not really knowing where you land and where you start and finish or where you come from and where you're going."

"The song is for everyone, and it can resonate with you however you want it to resonate for you," he continues. "Obviously, I'm talking about it from my perspective, but somebody else might relate with or interpret something their own way. That's what I wanted to do with this," he explains. "I always call them song writery songs, very metaphorical and open-minded songwriting. I've always wanted to do that. Obviously charting and doing well is great, but that's not why I got into music. I got into this because I love music and want to create music that has a message and lives for longer than the two-week promo run. Then it's in the charts and comes out, and no one ever speaks about it again, and it's just a little viral moment. That's the message behind the tune. I feel like this song has a deeper message to it and can live in people's hearts."

The opportunity to work with Cat Burns arrived at a pivotal moment for ArrDee as he contemplated how to move forward and what his next move should be and was looking to follow a different path than might be expected. "I was aware of some of her stuff before, predominantly 'Go' and the drum and bass remix of 'Go'. I'm from Brighton, and we're quite a heavy drum and bass kind of town," he says of his introduction to Cat. "After the summer of last year, I had a little bout of just falling out of love with the craft slightly because it felt very robotic. Ok, we're gonna get a 140bpm beat, and then we're going to have me sounding happy on it and talk about partying on it and talk about girls, and it's going to chart, and everyone's going to go home and happy days. It felt a bit boring.

"When I came in and started working on this project, I made it clear to my team that I was not touching that tempo when we went into this camp. I want to create music and fall back in love with this because that's the reason I do it. We had a load of different ideas, and I wanted some songwriters with me. I wanted some hooks. I wanted some female hooks, some of my favourite rap songs have people you didn't expect to collaborate together, but it works. Cat Burns happened to one of the people who came, and it was one of the ones that stuck, as you can hear from the vibe of the tune; it worked, it clicked."

There was something magical about that melody and those guitar sounds that sparked something in him. "You can never plan things like that. I'm a human, and everyone has different emotions and feelings. I always connect with strings. I connected with the guitar, and it made me want to open up and be vulnerable."

The track marks the start of what should be a big year for ArrDee, who has been working hard in the studio with big plans to come. In typically energetic ArrDee style, he knows he's created something special and isn't afraid to let everyone know about it. "I don't wanna gas myself up too much," he laughs. "Full of myself is a bad term to use, but I've always been very confident and in love with my own music. In the last few months, I've been impressing myself with the songwriting that we have that I didn't even know or couldn't have assumed was possible. I talk about manifesting things a lot, and a lot of the time, I see things coming, but with the songs we have here, I didn't go into this camp knowing we were going to be leaving with music like this. This is fucking incredible."

"I'm bringing the whole ArrDee universe to life," he proclaims. "I wouldn't say that I've changed. People grow, but I'm still that kid. I'm still that cheeky lad, and that's embedded in me, but for example, if I meet a stranger that's the version of me they're going to meet, but if they get to know me more, then you see deeper sides to me. I think it's a perfect time to dive into that and build that connection with the fan base where they can love and support me as an artist and person and feel like they're a part of something. This is a movement. In ten years' time, we're going to be like, yo, we were around when all of this happened, and shit was changing. It's just going to evolve and be bigger than anything the UK has seen before." ■

BIG W

Words: **Martyn Young.** Photos: **Elif Gonen.**

➜ Teaming up with fellow Dork faves like spill tab and Rachel Chinouriri, producer **Mac Wetha** is flexing his musical chops with a new project of his own.

Mac Wetha is the star around which an underground alt-pop universe has orbited for a good few years now. First, as the sonic alchemist behind NiNE8 Collective and then moving into his solo work, the London producer has made quite the name for himself as a super smart and progressive collaborator. As he prepares to release his second collaborative solo project 'Mac Wetha and Friends 2', though, Mac is revelling in moving from being the guy in the corner making everything sound good to being THE guy with all the ideas and sounds and a desire to bring his beats to life in his own singular way.

In 2023, life is very good for Mac Wetha. Commuting back and forth from his home in London to Portugal, where his girlfriend is recuperating from knee surgery, Mac is living his best life. "It's a good thing I've got going here," he laughs. "It's been constant work in the studio every day and coming here and chilling for a weekend, then coming back."

He's certainly earned the right to enjoy some time to chill after almost ten years of working with some of the most exciting pop visionaries. Constantly busy and constantly creating, Mac has always been the driving force behind other people's music. When Dork spoke to some of NiNE8 a few years ago, rapper Bone Slim said, "working with Mac Wetha is great because you can just come in and say, 'I was listening to something', and he can literally put something together, and it will be the NiNE8 version of that sound."

With Covid providing an inflexion point in everyone's lives, it prompted Mac Wetha to wonder what it would be like if he wasn't just the person bringing everything together for others, able to realise people's visions with seemingly magical ease, but rather he was the one forging his own path and making his own music informed by all the creative people he's encountered over the years. "I've never really thought much about what I'm doing in a detached way," he begins in a typically understated style. "I've always wanted to make as much stuff as possible, and I've been lucky enough to meet people I've really gotten along with and have become my best friends. That's where it started for me musically, and it's just blossomed from there.

"There was a point when I was playing in Biig Piig's live band, and I was just starting to think about doing solo stuff, and I was in three different bands and producing for people and mixing for people and DJing. It was so much, but it was great. When Covid happened, one of my bands finished, and I wasn't playing with Jess [Biig Piig] anymore because there were no shows, so there was a bit of a vacuum. That's where I was like, this is the time to start trying to sing on my beats, and that took over. I don't like to say it's the main thing because I make time for everything, but that became my main thing."

There's been a huge development in both Mac's creative skills and his confidence as an artist as he began to think of himself as a solo artist. "It's creating music from a very different place," he explains. "There's this duality in my brain where there's the producer brain and the artist brain. I'm so used to being the guy who can see what's going on with someone and understand what they're going for and make something cool, and now I've got to do that myself."

The environment he was working in felt familiar but alien at the same time. "It's hard to bounce off yourself," he admits. "When I started collaborating with my friend Jim Reed and Dan Holloway and a bunch of other people was when I was able to find a nice balance between having my production sound in a song but also having someone to bounce off and do the job that I was doing before for other people."

It makes perfect sense that to really succeed as a solo artist Mac had to channel the same sense of community and collaboration that harked back to his days in his bedroom on his mum's fold-out wooden garden chair, making beats and sounds with Lava La Rue and Biig Piig. "Throughout the two years I've been doing this solo stuff, I've really learned a lot," he says. "It's like I started from scratch. Something I noticed was I was really good at being the guy in the chair on the laptop when making music with people. That's what I'd been doing for years. I've been watching the artists I've worked with and looking at them like these mystical creatures who are channelling inspiration and doing their thing. I've always appreciated it, but when I'm in the seat, I'm doing my thing, and the focus is on making it. Having to set a loop up on a laptop now that I'm in the writing seat, I'm like, damn! This shit is so hard!"

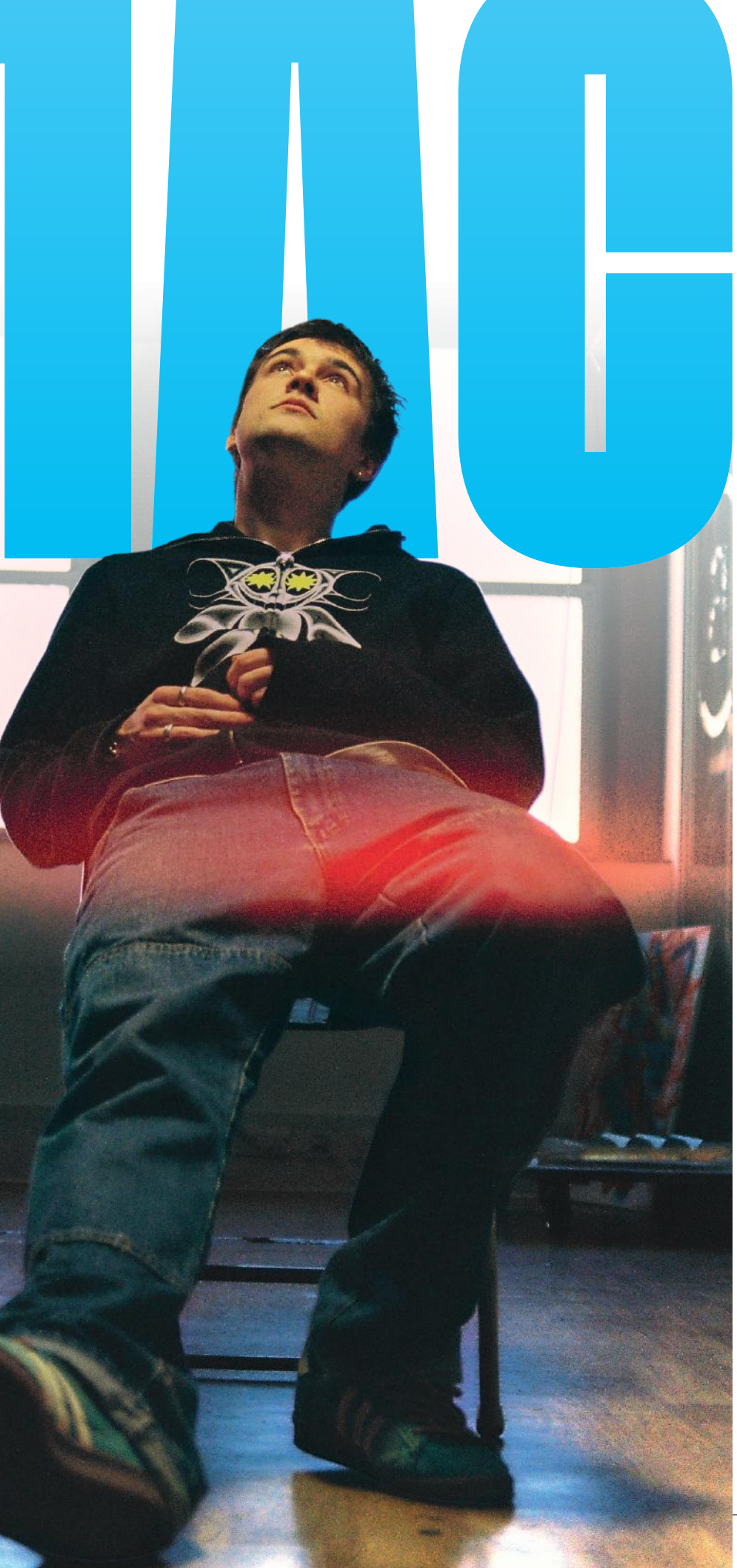
Swiftly, Mac did what he always has done and adapted and thrived and making music as a solo artist began to flow in a natural way. "The way I make music," he begins, worrying he might sound too pretentious, "it's true that the way I make music, and I think a lot of other people do, is that it just comes to you."

These musical visions and flashes of inspiration have manifested in some more distinctly personal passion projects for Mac. See, for example, the thrilling pop-punk rush of last year's 'Cloud Paint' EP, which referenced his background in rock bands

> **"There's this duality where there's the producer brain and the artist brain"**
>
> **MAC WETHA**







and his lifelong love of skateboarding, and the warped off-kilter alt-pop of his debut solo EP in 2021 'Make It Thru', to the sonic tapestry of beats and rhythms found on his first collaborative solo project 2019's 'Mac Wetha & Friends'. Now emboldened by having his own team around him and the confidence that he can actually do this on his own, he's making a huge leap forward with his next solo project, which finds him teaming up with all sorts of pop legends and long-time collaborators on 'Mac Wetha & Friends 2'.

This time, what's different is his voice is front and centre. This is very much a collection of his songs and feelings rather than just his beats and sounds. "There's a lot of nostalgia. A lot of memory and place and time," he explains of some of the project's themes. "I've been sitting down and writing and thinking about exactly what I want to express, and I've been writing big lists of things I want to touch on. I'm hoping to express myself in a more deep way rather than just making something that sounds cool."

Perhaps the truest indication of Mac Wetha's coming of age as a solo artist is his desire to reject what he's done before and keep pushing himself forward. "The first project was all over the place, but not in a bad way," he reflects. "I'm really proud of all that stuff. I enjoyed making it, and I love the project, but I don't want to go back to that style. A lot of the time, making music feels like testing the waters, and once you release something, that's when you can understand how you truly feel about it. I feel great about it, but I'm ready to move on to a different style again. You focus intently on making it and spill your guts, and once it's out, you can see it in a detached way. 'Yeah, this is sick. I appreciate that I did this, and I had to do it, but now what's next?' That's been my whole life musically, and that's how it will be for the rest of my life as well."

What's next is his most refined and developed collection of songs yet, as he combines his sonic mastery with a blissed-out naivety that makes songs like the recent gorgeous single 'Fairytale' featuring Rachel Chinouriri so endearing and emotionally resonant. The challenge for any producer is how do you make stuff that goes beyond sounding cool and inventive to evoke deep feelings and have a lasting legacy? With a sharp songwriting focus and a deeply humane quality, Mac's new music is reaching another level.

"The theme of my entire musical life has been learning from people through collaborating or hanging out. That's continued on this project, working with people like Rachel and spill tab, and being in the room with them and seeing where their mind goes when you're writing a song and how they perceive the song," he enthuses. "You have your box of how you make stuff, and they have theirs, and when you're together, it breaks the box you put yourself in. Some of their writing is more pop-leaning, I suppose, and that brings that side out of me. Everyone has got these go-to melodies in their head and cadences that become part of their style. It's sick to hear how they do that. You take that in, and I'm trying to show that in my performance in the songs."

2023 promises to be a breakout year for Mac Wetha. "I'm going to try and play as many shows as possible, whether that be by DJing or with the band," he says excitedly. "I'm also working on my next solo stuff. All I'll say is it rides nicely out of Mac Wetha and Friends. I'm making a new sound for myself." ■ **Mac Wetha's mixtape 'Mac Wetha & Friends 2' is out soon.**

Mac file.

Here's what you eed to know about Mac Wetha.

+ Mac Wetha is now 24 years old.

+ He loves skateboarding and has been skating since he was very young.

+ He's "very, very into chess". In fact, he's so into chess that he takes a bunch of other hip producers and cool pop stars like Dora Jar and Tendai to chess clubs in London. He says anyone can join in. "The frustrating thing is it's actually quite simple."

+ Mac is signed to Dirty Hit Records. You might have heard of some of their other acts, like Beabadoobee, Japanese House and The 1975.

+ We asked Mac what the best seat he's ever sat on is, and he said it was the fabled white garden chair in his room in Kingston, where he made all the early NiNE8 stuff. "It's a very important chair. It's my brother's room now. The studio is no longer, but the chair's still kicking about." Hurrah!

BANGERS.

THE BEST NEW TRACKS YOU NEED TO HEAR THIS MONTH.



Do Nothing
Happy Feet



➜ It takes a brave band to write and release a song that shares a name with a film about a musically challenged penguin, mostly because "musically challenged penguin" is a 10/10 insult, when you think about it. It's all very fitting for Do Nothing's latest, though - a song about finding happiness in the ordinary. There's certainly a lot to love here, and the video is wonderfully joyful, too.

Ashnikko
Worms



➜ The wait for a full debut album from Ashnikko has been a lengthy one, but there's no less attitude to be found on 'Worms', the first taster of 'WEEDKILLER' - set to land this June. Equal parts catchy and creepy, it's an on brand statement for an artist unafraid to weird us out a bit. 'The world is burning, I've got worms in my brain,' they muse. Worryingly relatable.

Chilli Jesson
Gucci Want The Suit Back



➜ It's super common for musicians and famous folk to borrow clothes from designers for photo shoots, events and the like, and then give them back after. The celeb gets to wear something cool, the label gets their clothes seen - everyone's happy. Sometimes though, things go wrong - the artist splits their trousers (yes there's a story there, don't ask), or maybe they just... keep them. It's the latter of those scenarios that Chilli Jesson has used as inspiration for his new 'un, 'Gucci Want The Suit Back'. A song about "frivolity, fame and fashion", really it's a lesson in not loaning Chilli Jesson your stuff.

piri & Tommy Villiers
updown



➜ It's a time of change for piri & Tommy Villiers, formerly piri & tommy. The up-and-coming dance duo are following up their debut project, 'froge.mp3', with a playful number that sees piri picking up the torch for self-empowerment.

Dylan
Every Heart But Mine



➜ What a cast Dylan has roped in for her latest single, 'Every Heart But Mine'. With an all-star choir of Cat Burns, Rachel Chinouriri, Mae Muller, Sody and Beren Olivia, it's an assertive, two-fingers-up anthem that's "the biggest confidence booster", Dylan explains. A song of many meanings, she adds: "I see it as a reference to love, as a reference to career moves and as a 'you have no idea what I'm capable of' feeling."

Niall Horan
Heaven



➜ Hello, lovers. Our lovely lad Niall has put down the golf clubs, packed away the pringle sweater, picked up his trusty guitar, and decided it's about time he returned with some new music. And thank goodness he has. 'Heaven' is quite possibly the high point of Niall's post 1D output to date - a soaring, swaying slice of modern-retro brilliance that proves itself an earworm for the ages. With new album 'The Show' on the way, Mr Horan is out to prove why he's long been one of pop's most underrated A-list megastars. Heavenly stuff.

beabadoobee
Glue Song



➜ Released just in time for Valentine's Day, beabadoobee's latest is something a bit different for the artist, and almost unbearably cute. "This is just me being really happy," she explains. "I'm in a really positive place for the first time in a long time and feeling love." It's a sentiment that oozes out of the song; a straight-up, unabashed ode to love.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF...

ELLIE DIXON.



You know what's easier than following around your fave pop stars, day in, day out, to see what they're up to right that minute? Asking them. This month, ELLIE DIXON lets us in on what she's up to.

9:00AM → I usually get up around 9 to a very panic-inducing phone alarm that I keep meaning to change to something more peaceful. I then spend 5 minutes meditating to get into a positive headspace. Then I cook up my favourite breakfast at the moment - fried eggs and potato waffles with coffee and a mango smoothie. I'm on such a potato waffle hype right now. I eat it watching Parks and Recreation (the current sitcom I'm rewatching) and go through my Instagram DMs, and reply to as many as I can.

10:00AM → I sit at my desk/ studio in my bedroom and start work on the production of a new song I've been trying to finish. I'm currently in the process of making an EP ['In Case Of Emergency'], so there's lots of new music in the works right now. I've been stuck with the production on it, so I took it to a listening group with some producers at Ten87 Studios in North London a few weeks ago and got some great advice I wanted to try out. I play around with the mix, record in some new backing vocals, and tried adding in a new bridge. I have messages coming in from my manager and label through the morning, which I dip in and out of while I'm working to keep on top of everything going on.

1:00PM → I ended up hitting a point where I got frustrated with the production, so I stop - one thing I've learned about the creative process is when to cut yourself off. You can overwork stuff just to feel like you're making progress and end up putting yourself in a bad mood. Instead, I made a TikTok using the footage from when I was on a billboard in Leicester Square over the weekend (thank you, Amazon Music). I then sent the video over to my label (Decca Records) and digital team for them to look at and put into my posting schedule. We have a calendar for what gets posted, when to make sure everything gets the right space, especially when there's so much going on; it's important to not bombard my followers with too much of the same thing or end up with long periods of no posting.

2:00PM → I reheat some leftovers for lunch, hang in the kitchen with my flatmate for a bit and watch more Parks and Rec while going through some emails.

3:00PM → I make another TikTok with the footage from my BBC Radio 1 interview with Mollie King last week. It was release week for my song 'Big Lizard Energy' last week, so there are loads of videos to be made from everything that happened.

3:30PM → I start working on the production of another new song. I like to keep my brain fresh and not work on a song for too long - your ears get over-sensitised when you hear something too many times, and I find my productivity declines. The track I'm working on this afternoon is a super upbeat and fun one, and I recently got a new jungle drum sample pack from a friend, so I experiment with trying some of the beats in the track. I export the project to track my progress before I stop for the day and send it over to a few friends and my manager to see what they think. I always like to get a couple of outside opinions when I've been sat by myself all day because it keeps my perspective in check, and it's fun to get excited about a track with other people!

6:00PM → I get a bus and a tube across London to celebrate the launch of a book by a mutual friend Eva Rice about music in the 90s. I take calls with my manager on the journey to discuss a potential songwriting/ production project for a company.

10:00PM → I travel home and write this article up on my way back!

HYPE

YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO THE BEST NEW NAMES.



Words: **Martyn Young.**

HEMLOCKE SPRINGS

North Carolina breakout **hemlocke springs** - aka Isimeme Udu, otherwise known as Naomi - has arrived in a whirlwind of buzz to become the hottest and most vibrant new name in art-pop.

→ "I'M LIKE YEAH!!! THIS IS A PROJECT. THIS IS SOMETHING TO BE PASSIONATE ABOUT!!" hemlocke springs is excited. Very excited. And so she should be. She's only three songs in, but cooking up in the background are all sorts of future concoctions and big plans from a new artist who once was studying a biology degree and has now swapped that for being a scientist of a different kind, making some of the maddest pop experiments around.

Before we get to those big plans, though, let's have some facts. hemlocke springs is Isimeme Udu; she goes by the name Naomi. She's 23 years old and from Concord, North Carolina. And she's one of the most exciting new pop sensations around. The name doesn't mean anything, btw. It was just taken from a random name generator online. Like everything with hemlocke springs, it's all super instinctive and driven firmly by her hyperactive imagination. From the minute people heard her first song 'gimme all ur luv' in May 2022, and it blew up online, Naomi has been riding the crest of a wave. "It feels new," she says breathlessly from the studio in LA where she's making her debut album. "I feel like since May, I've just been what's happening, and I still feel like I'm on that path where I don't understand what's going on."

Her creativity initially was very much self-discovered and DIY in nature. She discovered music back in middle school by hearing Avicci's 'Levels', and it opened up a whole world of possibilities once she was introduced to Garageband by a friend. "I don't know why, but I was like, oh my gosh, this is the craziest thing I ever heard, so I went down this electronic music phase," she remembers. "It was such an art form. It was so accessible. I could just go on my computer and do stuff. I could click on keys and make a song. That was crazy."

Initially, she was just creating for fun, but having a tiny bit of validation from a musical hero made her realise this might just be something she could take further. "It was when I released 'gimme all ur luv' and scrolled on TikTok and saw in the comments Grimes, who was somebody I never thought would even know my name, saying 'this is good'," she beams. "I was like, what is going on? Maybe you're on to something, Naomi. I thought it would always be a little thing and not something like this where I'm getting asked questions about it."

One of the most endearing things about an artist is when they don't even realise the extent of their talent, and Naomi's blend of alt-pop experimentalism aligned with super melodic bubblegum hooks is truly intoxicating. She's so focused in the moment though it's almost as if rising pop stardom has crept up on her. "It sounds redundant, but I'm just going with the flow," she says. "Being in the moment is how I've worked out, 'Oh yeah, you're an artist now'. In early interviews, I was like, 'oh, I guess I'm a music artist now, and I have a little bit of a fanbase'. Now I feel a little bit more solid with it."

That solidity comes from experiencing viral success online on TikTok. As a new Gen Z artist, Naomi is super engaged with how to be creative online, and a platform like TikTok is a perfect way to experience hemlocke springs. The challenge for any new artist is how you translate that virality. "It's a double-edged sword when it comes to TikTok and artists, and I totally get it, but for me, I owe a lot because that's how I'm here," she explains. "I see the positives and the negatives, but it's an obligation for me in a way now. It's how I directly connect with people and with my fans. Virality is great, but it's temporary. You have to think about how you are able to sustain something to last for a long time. You have to go back to the main source. You have to interact with the people. Especially since I got my start off TikTok. TikTok comments or Instagram DMs are the closest I get to an interaction. I try to take time out of my day; I want to do these things. I want to maintain that relationship because those are the people that will be buying your merch. Those are the people who will wait in line to see you in concert."

> **"I scrolled on TikTok and saw in the comments Grimes saying 'this is good'. I was like, what is going on? Maybe you're on to something, Naomi"**
>
> HEMLOCKE SPRINGS

Naomi is not beginning to think about how she can truly bring the hemlocke springs world to life. Her last single, 'stranger danger' felt like a big step up, and the new music she's working on promises to be similarly revelatory. "The ultimate vision is to have more people find me. In order to do that, I need to work on more music, and I'm working on more music that feels like a reset in a sense. It's a sonic reset but still maintains the sound of hemlocke springs. It's not that I didn't take myself seriously in the past, but I'm trying to take myself a little bit more seriously when it comes to hemlocke springs."

She's now doing more work in actual studios with a creative team behind her and cites the expansive creative pop of Caroline Polachek as an influence. "I listened to the new Caroline Polachek album, and I was like, oh yeah, this is awesome. This is the future. This is where it's going. She uses her voice as an instrument. It's just crazy how good her voice is. You hear it, and you're like, oh yeah, that's her. That's something that I want in my music. I want people to listen to a song and be like, oh yeah, that's hemlocke springs. I'm trying to do crazy things with my voice."

Naomi has elaborate plans for touring and an expansive stage set. "You only get a first impression once. I want people to come to my shows not out of curiosity but because they want to see a hemlocke springs show," she says. From humble beginnings, Naomi is ready for the whole world to hear hemlocke springs; even if, in typically unassuming fashion, she still can't quite believe it herself. "A pop star? Who am I kidding? I'm trying to. Maybe in the future," she laughs. Well, Naomi, we think the future for hemlocke springs is right now. ■

FIRST ON.↓



KING ISIS

→ Signed to Dirty Hit, alongside independent label No Matter, King Isis is from the Really Very Cool Oakland, CA and knows how to blend those genres together. From R&B, indie and grunge to jazz and blues, there's a magpie-like eye for the shiny things at play - all presented in a textured, smart, zeitgeist-piercing package. Latest single 'taste of u' sells it well - a vibrant and essential new talent to keep both eyes on.



NIGHTBUS

→ Freshly signed to So Young Record, Manchester trio Nightbus have that sort of broody, atmospheric cool locked down. With a self-defined mission to create "alternative music that could either be played in the club or perhaps the journey home", debut single 'Way Past Three' is a nighttime delight that recalls a more propulsive, direct version of The xx. Follow up on the early promise, and we could have something special on our hands.



POST-PARTY

→ Dublin's Post-Party are the latest name out of the blocks from a city of diverse and, usually, pretty damn excellent new musical talent. Following in the sonic wake of the likes of Inhaler, their soaring, anthemic chops were cut on a shared love for the likes of The Strokes and Phoenix, but as latest offering 'Kimbo' shows, they're not so arch-cool they can't connect. Big indie for big ambitions.

TOMMY LEFROY

Bonded by their love of literature and the beauty found in well-crafted lyricism and narrative, Tommy Lefroy are coming into their own with their second EP, 'Rivals'.



Words: **Neive McCarthy.**

> **Be as messy as you need to be"**
>
> **TESSA MOUZOURAKIS**

→ FOR THE PRIDE & PREJUDICE FANS AMONGST US, THE NAME THOMAS LEFROY MIGHT RING SOME BELLS. The man responsible for Jane Austen's own heartbreak, he is thought by many to have inspired Mr Darcy himself. Fast forward a couple of centuries, and enter Tessa Mouzourakis and Wynter Bethel. Battling their own experiences of men acting out of order and navigating their early twenties, they looked no further than the man himself when it came to deciding on a band name. And so became Tommy Lefroy.

Dropping their debut EP, 'Flight Risk', back in 2021, Tessa and Wynter meticulously weaved a world of magical, empowered examinations of the self and the world around them. They dove headfirst into what it meant to be a bit flighty sometimes, to be lost in their writing and on the cusp of seismic changes in their own lives. Two years later, those changes have played out, and Tessa and Wynter have emerged anew – bolder, inspired, unafraid.

"We joke that 'Flight Risk' was the flight, and 'Rivals' is the fight," Tessa laughs over Zoom from Montreal, where the two will support Samia on tour later that evening. "When we were working on 'Flight Risk', we wrote and produced most of it apart. I was in London, and Wynter was in LA. With 'Rivals', we had the chance to really make this music together. Having performed live and understood how this music might translate into a live setting, it feels a bit more like stepping into ourselves. There's more assurance and power."

Wynter adds: "Our experience with 'Flight Risk' was empowering not just creatively but also personally. The places we were at with 'Flight Risk', we were in our early 20s, getting ghosted all the time. Now, we've really come into our own so much, in part because of this project. We're viewing everything from a more empowered place, including our personal relationships and things like that. It's definitely stepping into the next level of that, but still needing to unpack and heal some past things."

'Rivals' feels like the Tommy Lefroy we were introduced to on their first tracks, but with more layers peeled back. They're more unapologetic than ever, and it was apparent from the very first snippet of the EP, 'Dog Eat Dog'. A scathing introduction, it dissected the inescapable recurrence of pitting women against one another and acts as a call to arms for women confronting that and embracing one another. Setting the tone for the EP, 'Dog Eat Dog' seemed to position Tommy Lefroy at their most powerful yet.

"We are so inspired by so many of our friends who are making awesome music and visuals and art," Wynter explains. "'Dog Eat Dog' came from a conversation about how crazy it is that there's still this whisper that there are only so many spots at the top, and if one woman is on the radio, then another can't be."

With a circle of fellow female musicians surrounding them, the duo have a fountain of awe-inspiring women to look to. "It's so inspiring, even being on this tour with Samia," muses Tessa. "She's an incredible performer and incredible writer, and she's just so authentically herself. She's so honest in how she tells her stories, and that's really inspiring, especially for me. I feel like sometimes it's hard for me to get to the meat of it and open up fully. I'm excited for us to write more music, and I hope to channel a bit of that confidence and unapologetic telling of your story."

Telling their version of events has been a crucial foundation for Tommy Lefroy to build upon, something born from that bookish affinity that began their journey. They continually return to the myths and stories that preceded them, and re-engage with those age-old conversations in an absolutely vital way. Whilst their initial prompt to consider creating a band was a boygenius show, it isn't just their musical habits that play a part.

"As much as many of our influences are sad girl music, and that's how we relate and how we wanted to write, having those references makes it about more than just us and extends it beyond our stories. It makes it feel less silly, almost – it's about more than us; it's a bigger conversation," reflects Wynter.

"We're engaging in those traditions as well. In calling ourselves Tommy Lefroy, it's as much a nod to being the heartbreaker instead of the heartbroken, but it's also about being a writer and having our own non de plume, like a Bronte, like a George Eliot," continues Tessa It's that sort of reference of trying on being the writer, and it being about the writing and what we have to say."

Their harmonies are always cosmic, and the production, especially on this EP, is developed incredibly. 'Slick' plays with shuddering beats and layers of texture, while 'Worst Case Kid' is pulsing and bristling, a far more ambitious track for the pair. Yet, as they emphasise, it is their lyricism that makes Tommy Lefroy who they are. Here, more than ever, they embrace honesty with open arms. They're existential, critical and hurt. They're imperfect, and that's fine – they're ready to rise above it all.

'The Mess' is a poignant example. They've often spoken of their engagement with the 'sad girl' trope, but in the last couple of years, there's been more and more talk of what it means to be a messy girl. Think Fleabag, or the women of Ottessa Moshfegh and Eliza Clark, or the rise of female artists telling their stories and acknowledging all the ways in which they are flawed and being okay with that. "I thought being a woman was cleaning up the mess / but I am, but I am the mess," sing Tessa and Wynter. Growing up being instructed that there's a certain way to be a woman, which erases all complexities, 'The Mess' acts as a rejection of that idea completely.

"The 'messy girl' trope is something we were talking about super early in our relationship," Wynter recalls. "'Trashfire' had this idea of not having it all together and looking around at everyone else and wondering if they feel like they have it all together. Very early on, I remember being a kid and having a moment of watching other women and the ways they operated in the world and how they needed to button it up and present themselves in a way, and I just didn't want to do that. It's much more interesting to not do that."

Tessa chips in: "It's also a commentary on just how incredibly exhausting it is to try and meet that societal demand; be yourself, and be as messy as you need to be."

The world they have created for their listeners is exactly that – numerous young women who feel exactly the same seem to gravitate towards Tommy Lefroy. Writing is something we look for company and solidarity in, whether it's the books we consume or the lyrics that flood our ears each morning. Tessa and Wynter continuously offer that acknowledgement that they're with you through all of it.

"That's the crux of it," Tessa expresses. "We want it to feel like a community. The biggest thing for me is feeling understood and having that shared experience. Mental health can feel very alienating, and you can feel very alone. In the music, I want to offer a hand in the dark, this understanding, because you're not alone." ■

WASIA PROJECT

Sibling duo **Wasia Project** are shooting for the moon.

Words: **Jessica Goodman.** Photo: **Tom Pacitti.**



> “We have quite a cool facade, much cooler than we actually are”
>
> **WILL GAO**

→ “DID YOU SEE RIHANNA’S SUPER BOWL PERFORMANCE?!” Talking a few days after the show in question, Olivia Hardy’s excitement levels are high. “I’ve been binge-watching Super Bowl performances recently, and they’re just so crazy.” Thrilled by the prospect of turning musical performance into something spectacular, her dreams for her own music are easy to convey. “Just to have a full, maximum everything,” she grins.

It’s a dream she shares with her brother, Will Gao – when he’s not working as an actor (most recently in Netflix smash-success Heartstopper) and she’s not focused on her studies or performing in an orchestra. Together they form Wasia Project, and the music they’re making is magic.

Turning things up to eleven might be a philosophy more typically associated with rock acts, but Wasia Project have never been a band to work within conventions. Both classically trained musicians with a keen affinity for pop, the siblings’ ethereal take on alt-pop only gets more exciting with every new song they share.

“We have quite a cool facade, I feel,” Will describes of the band. “Much cooler than we actually are.” What might look like self-doubt in print is something the duo wear with pride, all smiles as they describe the weird, goofy, and chaotic energy that comes to life when they create together.

Reminiscing about the disco room at a seaside family holiday resort they visited as kids (something Olivia had forgotten about while Will enthuses that “it’s my first memory of properly hearing music, as in, when you feel it in your bones”) and getting sidetracked when a misheard comment switches the conversation from cursive singing to screaming heavy metal, Will and Olivia are here to make music and have fun doing it – and they’re inviting you along for the ride.

With a love for playing and performing inbuilt at a young age, writing was something they felt drawn to naturally. “I remember always making things up on the piano and kind of improvising and stuff, but I never actually knew what it was,” Will recalls.

For Olivia, her introduction to writing music was quite different. “My dad would go to the shop and buy, like, ‘Now [That’s What I Call Music!] 92’ and all those CDs,” she laughs. “I got Taylor Swift.” The album not only ignited a lifelong love of pop, but inspired her to pick up a brand new instrument. “I got my first guitar because of her,” she grins. “I think it was once we were exposed to the sound world of pop, and more pop genres, that we started to write.”

After sharing a series of home-produced singles online alongside existential yet ever-relatable musings like ‘did they friendzone u? Coz same’ and ‘all these emotions man’, the band went into the studio for the first time to record their debut EP. Released last year, ‘how can i pretend?’ is a compilation of songs the siblings describe as “like a step out of the bedroom for us.”

It’s a metaphor the band are sticking with as they enter a new chapter. “We’re opening the bedroom door to a studio,” Will describes. “A lot of our songs are quite...” He pauses, taking a moment to work out the best way to express what he’s thinking. “They’re relatively melancholic so far,” he laughs. “In a live show, you need a balance of those beautiful singer-songwriter songs, but then you also want those really cool bops.”

Feeling that they were lacking in the latter, a bop is exactly what they made. Latest single ‘Petals On The Moon’ is an ode to wanting bigger and brighter and better, forged from the delightfully pure desire to have a song that people can dance to. Recorded from the week after their last live shows in Manchester and London in December, making this single is something Olivia describes as being “the most fun I’ve had recording a song yet.”

From bringing their ideas to life through collage, to compiling photos of their producer’s dog (“Teddy’s just a legend,” Will grins), that time spent in the studio together has instilled Wasia Project with a new lease of life. “We’re in this new studio space that’s basically a playground,” Olivia details. “We feel a lot more free than we have ever been.” With that freedom, the pair are having the time of their lives. Experimenting with their sound, playing with different genres and textures, the siblings are building the bigger and better that the lyrics of their last single were yearning for.

“We’re opening up this sound we’ve created, which is kind of a fusion of a whole bunch of different influences,” Olivia grins. “I think we’re trying a lot of new things.” That is as much as she says before caution sets in. “I don’t know much I should give away...” With festival appearances set for this summer and more new music imminent (the band’s next single is set to drop early April), what we’ve heard so far is only the beginning.

“We’re very much going to experiment with sounds,” Will describes. “We’re also going to experiment with our live shows more. We’ve always been doing that, but we want to take things to the next level.”

He’s not wrong. At Wasia Project’s last live show in London in December, they not only added a trombone player and saxophonist into their ever-growing live band, but also partnered with a local bubble tea vendor to offer free drinks to their crowd. “We just wanted something to give to the fans,” Olivia states. “Like, why not?”

“I feel like Wasia Project,” Will starts, then – after a quick amendment that “I mean, it should be very centred around the music” – continues, “it should be a real show, like a piece of theatre. It should be an overwhelming stimulus for all the senses.”

Experimenting with and evolving their live show wasn’t the only reason they set up this partnership. It was also a way the siblings could say thank you and give back to their fans. “There’s this really intimate connection we have with the people who have supported us,” Oliva says. “It is very early on, and it’s very personal, and we want to keep this sort of connection.”

The fondness they speak of their fans with is every bit as enamoured and appreciative as the hype that surrounds them online. The band’s social media tags are full of devotion. There are dedications, memes, song covers, fan art... A community built around enthusiasm for the music Wasia Project are creating.

“The fact that the creativity we’re doing, and the art we’re making, is inspiring art and inspiring this journey of lots of very creative people, creating together and meeting and connecting,” Will describes, “it’s a really beautiful thing. That’s the beauty of communities, especially around musicians and artists. It’s this world of bubbling creativity.”

This is the world that Wasia Project create not only for their fans but for themselves, and they thrive in it. “We’re making a lot more music to release, and we’re releasing more music, and we’re in the recording studio a lot more,” Olivia details of their plans for this year. They aren’t sharing the particulars of any further releases yet, but from what they are hinting, it seems clear that it’s going to be something special.

“We actually did a demo with a string quartet, and it works really well. It added such a different kind of perspective,” Will enthuses. “We’ve both been brought up very classically trained; it’s not too unknown to us. To put these two worlds together, we’re really excited to do that.” ■

Words: **Ali Shutler.** Photo: **Caitlin Ricaud.**

VENBEE

With the air of someone who probably picks up new mates everywhere they go, **Venbee** is an immensely likeable newcomer who delivers smart nighttime-tinged pop.



"It's okay if things aren't working out; that's a message I'm stuck on sharing"

VENBEE

→ VENBEE WAS ONLY EXPECTING TO PLAY TO A HANDFUL OF KIDS ON HER RECENT UK HEADLINE TOUR, but the run of shows was full of "absolute nutters," she says with a grin. "I've been loving it."

Erin Doyle, aka Venbee, is having an exciting time of it lately. The Chatham-based musician has released two songs so far – 'Low Down' and 'Messy In Heaven' – with both racking up millions of streams. A third is due for release later this month.

She first started writing songs when she was 8 and hasn't ever really stopped. In 2020, she started releasing her "shitty" laptop recordings under a different name and then spent a further two years grinding away on TikTok. She released 'Low Down' on a whim last year, and things suddenly went from zero to 28 million and counting.

That drum and bass-inspired song was written about a time in Erin's life when she was feeling "really, really crap," while the pulsating electronics offer a touch of optimism.

"It's very much my story, so for me personally, it was a special song, but I had no idea whether it was going to relate to other people," she admits. "It did alright, though," she adds with a grin, especially because it was uploaded to TikTok on a whim.

Then came 'Messy In Heaven', a dreamy track that imagines Jesus doing cocaine on a night out. The controversial track has become a mainstay on BBC Radio 1 despite Erin thinking it "would flop really badly."

"I was really nervous about releasing that song, but I'm really glad that the story of drug addiction and how the greatest of people can fall down a difficult lane has been heard and received. I think it's an important message to share. Now I've just got to follow it up."

This is where 'Gutter', another slice of raw storytelling set against pulsating drum and bass, comes in. "It's my life story," explains Erin. "It talks about where my head was at when I was 15, and my life started to go a bit skew-whiff. I lost track of things, started listening to the demons in my brain, and couldn't see any other route other than self-destruction.

"Then I talk about being 22. I still don't have a clue what I'm doing, but I'm seeing how far I can go. It's a song about being grateful but also recognising the trouble I went through and the pain I caused.

"I want everyone to know that it's okay if you don't know what you're doing; it's okay. If you don't know who you are. And it's okay if things aren't working out," she continues. "That's a message I'm stuck on sharing."

She knows people will look at her and think 'overnight success story', but that's not the case. "I was working three jobs to make music work. I struggled, but I never gave up because as soon as you do, you've lost your chance at whatever could possibly happen. Being resilient is so important," she shares.

Venbee is very much a drum and bass head. She discovered the genre via Rudimental in 2012 before moving on to stuff like ShyFX and then going heavier. "I really got into it when I was old enough to go to raves, though," she adds. "They really are the time of your life."

But her music also takes influence from the likes of Alanis Morrissette, Stevie Nicks, Adele ("she can do no wrong in my eyes"), Demi Lovato and Lizzo. "She writes such positive tunes. If I'm ever feeling like shit, I'll play her music and know that I'm worth something. It's so important to have people like her," explains Erin. It's why her own songwriting is so honest and raw.

"I'm really not good at talking about what's going on in my head, so writing about it is my way of processing my own emotions. I write songs for myself, but I also write songs in the hope that they'll be heard and felt."

"I've spent a lot of my life in denial about where my head is at," she continues. "I don't care about the charts or stuff like that; I care about people listening to my songs and going 'I've felt like that before' because it makes me feel not alone, and I'm sure it makes other people feel not alone as well."

On tour, she performed another song called 'If Love Could Have Saved You', which tackles men's mental health and suicide. "It's a tribute to people who have lost their lives and telling people to hold on. It's so emotional. The first time I sang it, I had to stop myself from crying because I could see the effect it was having on people in the crowd. Music's a beautiful thing, isn't it?"

There's a mixtape coming later this year, ahead of a debut album that Erin wants to be "raw, emotional and full of my deepest, darkest secrets. I think that'll just be a weight off my chest," she explains. Beyond that, "I want to go as far as I possibly can. I would love to go worldwide, but who knows?"

Despite the string of recent successes, Erin has experienced years of releasing music into the void and knows nothing is promised. "You're never safe in this game," she explains. "You can have a song with 200 million streams, and you might never be able to follow it up. As soon as you've got one success, you're labelled a one-hit wonder until the next one." Then the cycle repeats.

"I guess I do have a point to prove to people," she admits. We're a couple of weeks away from the release of 'Gutter' and Erin is "way more nervous now than I was before I shared 'Messy In Heaven'."

Even if 'Gutter' is her biggest hit to date, she knows "the nerves will keep stacking up, and the pressure will keep building. I want to keep going, though. I'm always searching for me, and I'm not going to give up." There's that resilience again.

Venbee is part of the blossoming UK scene that's taking drum and bass and making it pop. She's already toured with piri & Tommy Villiers and is part of a WhatsApp group featuring over 60 female creatives who uplift and support one another.

She says drum and bass's recent resurgence in the charts is "because people are realising it fucking bangs; I love how drum and bass tickles my brain."

"Full credit to PinkPantheress and piri & tommy for pioneering that [movement]. I met PinkPantheress at the shoot for 'Low Down', and she's the most wonderful human being. piri and tommy are good friends of mine as well. I love watching them all smash it."

She goes on to say that, as well as the music, she loves the culture of drum and bass. "It's always been such an accepting scene. I came in, started dropping tracks, and they could easily have shut me out, but the whole community has been nothing but welcoming. No one's listened to my music and then tried to tell me it isn't drum and bass, which is what I was expecting to be honest."

Being part of a wider scene "makes me feel accepted," says Erin. "It also means I'm comfortable creating my own lane in this genre. I still want to be able to hop on some real heavy drum and bass, though. I really do love the culture, but for me, I want people to rave to my music, I want them to have a great fucking time, but I want them to do it safely."

As much as Venbee is part of this exciting new scene that's reshaping what traditional drum and bass is, Erin knows it's important to stay true to who she is.

"That said, I'm massively complimented when people say I sound like Billie Eilish," she adds with a grin. "If I hear anyone compare us, I make them say it again because I'm so flattered by it. Billie's got better pipes than me, though." ■

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After the runaway success of her debut, **ARLO PARKS** is back with a record that sees her taking inspiration from some unexpected sources...

WORDS: **NEIVE MCCARTHY.**
PHOTOS: **JENNIFER MCCORD.**
STYLING: **LEWIS MUNRO.**
MAKE-UP: **EMILIE LOUIZIDES.**

Mohair sweater by YMC. Cargos by SMR Days.



"I was fully in my Mary Oliver vibe," laughs Arlo Parks over Zoom. After a whirlwind few years following the unanimous success of her debut album, 'Collapsed in Sunbeams', the 22-year-old found inspiration in the works and ethos of the poet, known for her love for long, rambling walks and adoration of nature. When you're balancing winning BRIT Awards and heading out on sold-out tours with trying to keep yourself sane, it makes sense that she'd be a figure to turn to.

Making the move from her hometown of London to LA last year, Arlo found herself in a sort of retreating state. The last couple of years had been a non-stop, chaotic upwards scramble. In LA, Arlo faced a completely different world to the home comforts of drizzly London. Instead, it was constant sun, close proximity to nature and a new means of grounding herself.

"I spend a lot of time out here by the beach, in the mountains, going up to Big Bear, being in the forest and the sun," Arlo explains. "Simultaneously with my move to LA, I realised how much nature means to me and how much it grounds me. That also comes from having spent a lot of time touring. Being able to go for a walk in the park, in the desert or wherever it might be, was the one thing that kept a layer of consistency to my days. When I moved, I made a more conscious effort to do that. It makes me feel small in a way that I like. When you're at the foot of a mountain, you feel like a little pebble. The worries and the anxieties that feel consuming to you, it minimises them in a way that's nice. Time ebbs and flows; everything ebbs and flows. These things have been here for centuries; time passes, and things change. It brings me back down to earth."

It appears to be the very move that afforded her a new perspective with which to embark upon a new chapter in her career. Two years on from her debut, Arlo returns with 'My Soft Machine'. She has always worked in time capsules – 'Collapsed in Sunbeams' was a sonic journal chronicling her own coming of age. 'My Soft Machine', however, captures what came after that. From falling in love to loss, anxiety to sheer joy, it is the musical equivalent of a camera over the shoulder as Arlo navigated this period of her life – a sun-glazed home video of her newly changed world. In a new place, with new people, new experiences were born.

"It infused it with this sense of adventure," she recalls. "I already had a nice foundation of friends, so I didn't feel lonely. London to me is home; it's comfort. I feel so surrounded, and I know it so well. I was looking for the opposite. I was looking for a city that stretched out before me, and I had no idea where to go or what I was doing; the possibilities felt endless. Moving to LA mirrored the approach I wanted for the music. I wanted it to feel like it was coming from a completely new place. I wanted to feel like it pushed the bounds of what I had done before. I felt like actually geographically moving to a new place and being surrounded by new nature, new friends, new food, and being immersed in something that takes you out of your comfort zone, that naturally comes out in what you do. You push yourself to the edge a little bit."

Though pushing herself into this different world and embracing discomfort, there was an act of reconnection at the core of this process. Somewhere along the way, the reasons for making music in the first place get lost. At some point, it becomes vital to find them. "I was going back to the roots. That was to process and untangle, to pay homage to songs I like and have fun and feel like a teenager again. I was chasing that feeling rather than it having any intention of me being in the studio making things. Creating it that way felt quite open-ended and meant that I could channel something rather than feeling that I had to start with a solid idea of what I wanted it to be. I was just making things."

Ultimately, 'My Soft Machine' became indebted to slowing down. With everything else so fast-paced, taking the time to find her way back to those organic feelings was key. It also involved becoming way more present, whether through her embrace of nature or otherwise.

"My most grounding process is taking notes of what's going on, what's in my head," shares Arlo. "My songs become my journal. The last few years I've had have moved very, very fast. I've had to be empathic about slowing down time. Even handwriting versus doing it on a phone or

Rings by Bleue Burnham. Sweater by Namaecheko

> *When you're at the foot of a mountain, you feel like a little pebble"*
>
> **ARLO PARKS**



So much was happening externally, so my safe space was to go inward and ask myself how I was feeling about things"

ARLO PARKS

whatever. Your hand moves slower than your mind. You're almost forced to slow down on a day when you might have a million different things to do. If I want to write down a phrase I heard someone say, a text message someone wrote me, or a section of an audiobook, I have to slow down and take 5 to 10 minutes. There's something about the physical act of writing that I found really, really helpful. I never feel more present than when I'm writing something down, especially when it's something I've learnt or a piece of writing that has really moved me. It takes me so long to read books because when I see a phrase I like, I'll copy it into my notebook. It's an extremely long process, but it helps me slow down and absorb things."

On her first album, Arlo often adopted the role of the observant – 'Caroline' saw her recount an argument she witnessed between a couple in public. Here, however, she leans into intimacy a bit more. Rather than tuning into those around her, she tunes into herself instead.



"It felt natural to go inwards in that way. It felt natural to notice how I felt about the world around me. So much was happening externally, so my safe space was to go inward and ask myself how I was feeling about things and go smaller rather than being this observer or onlooker that had the time to sit and watch and make notes and try to understand the world around me. It became more about taking note of how I was processing what I was seeing."

Perhaps because of that more innate understanding of the self, the album seemed cosmically born, spilling into being more organically than Arlo had experienced before. "All the songs you heard on the record were made in these weeks or three-day stints that felt like they were touched by magic. There were these periods of breath in between touring and doing other things, and it would just come flooding out of me, not in a way that was planned or intentional. It felt like a snapshot or a scene from a movie that you've just paused. I wanted it to move in scenes like that, that felt self-contained."

If 'My Soft Machine' was a movie, it'd be a sun-soaked escapade, faded film shots of blooming oranges and yellows. There's a real warmth to it. Opening track 'Bruiseless' is an outpouring of wishes for change and expressions of regret. It quickly draws to an end, crackles flooding the track. From that very point, this distinctive warmth is established. The slick, disco-leaning grooves of 'Blades' and jazzy guitars of 'Purple Phase' continue to grow. Even when lyrically it's far more joyous, that warmth pervades all, as if to say that even in the darkest of times, Arlo and her music are there to bring light.

"The music that I love is like that," remarks Arlo. "When you listen to 'Speed Trials' by Elliott Smith, or you listen to Bright Eyes, or you listen to A Tribe Called Quest or Jai Paul, or 'Weird Fishes'. There's this sense of warmth to it. When you listen to it, you feel like you're sat in it – you have a little chair, and the band are playing around you; you're really in the world of things. That also comes from the mix. We laboured over sixteen mixes deep because it was so important to have that sense of warmth and to feel surrounded and like the arms of the music were







I wanted to explore sounds that felt a bit more abrasive"

ARLO PARKS

around you. I always have loved music that made me feel that way. I like music that offers this sense of comfort and this solid, sturdy base for the words on top of it that may be a little bit more difficult to hear or more melancholy. You always have the warmth of the instrumental that helps you bathe in it a little bit more comfortably."

By combining this deep-rooted appreciation for that kind of sound with the back-to-basics approach to the album's creation, Arlo was able to produce an environment where that glowing joy and creative freedom was a natural character. "I almost got out of my own way to just see what happens. There were absolutely no boundaries to what that might be. To be able to pull from references that people may not expect, to think about Smashing Pumpkins, or Deftones, whatever it might be – to show all these different sides of myself and to be really involved in the production and the minutiae of the music did feel very free. That's how I would characterise it – everyone who worked on it is also a dear friend. Everyone approached me with this real softness and understanding. We challenged each other, and we laughed, and we ate tacos. It was so natural."

It was more complex, however than just sunshine and good times. It allowed Arlo to see herself from a new perspective, arguably aided by that much-needed grounding in the present. It was an act of going deeper – pushing herself to the edge in another way. "I won't peek through the blinds I've shut in myself / And so nothing changed," she sings on 'I'm Sorry'. It's a conscious effort to twist those blends open, gently, and allow herself to progress.

"This whole album is about peeking through the blinds. So much of the music that I've been in love with has been about people coming face to face with the ugliness, or the tangled mess, or the trauma and pain, or the darkness within, but also the light. Being like, 'this makes me really happy, I should do more of this', or 'being around this person makes me feel happy, and I haven't told them yet'. Being honest with yourself."

Confronting both good and bad meant that amongst the warmth, there had to also be some moments of heaviness musically, too. Sonically, there's a lot of advancement for Arlo. It's undoubtedly still intrinsically Arlo Parks, but it develops in a sprawling direction that might be unexpected for those heading into the album with ideas of laidback indie-pop. Of course, there are shades of that, but something else entirely, too.

"I wanted to explore sounds that felt a bit more abrasive. In the end of 'Puppy', there's this synth that's quite shredded and filtered. That came from me loving My Bloody Valentine and that song 'Who Sees You?' and just loving how that wall of sounds crashing over you is so chaotic. The guitars are smashing into one another, but it still has this sense of calm. It brings balance in the same way the album title talks about softness and the metallic steel machine. Having this balance was really important. I wanted to have more contrast and for the energy to flow to many different places rather than being more consistent."

'Devotion' is a similarly powerful moment – while

Arlo professes her steadfast adoration for a lover, the track builds and builds until it unleashes a cast of ferocious guitars, plunging the song into absolute euphoria. It's as though her sound has more breathing room here, free to stretch and grow in a way she perhaps wasn't before. With so many surprising twists and turns, it becomes increasingly immersive.

More dynamic, explosive tracks also allow for more creative risks when crafting a live set – something Arlo cares ardently about. Her live shows until now have seen the stage decked out in glorious sunflowers, casting that vibrant sun across her audiences and bringing that comforting sonic heat into whichever room she will captivate that evening.

"The internet can only afford so much connection. When I'm playing a show, people have paid money and taken the time out of their day to come down to this venue as a community and watch me. There's something so special about that. That's what I live for, and that tells me I'm making something that's affecting people and doing good. I see the faces in the crowd – the little kid at their first gig, on their dad's shoulders, the two queer kids holding hands and feeling unafraid to do that at my shows. I see the old dude there by himself, having a great time. The variety of people who come to the shows, and the energy they give, and how everyone takes care of each other is like nothing else."

Such a safe, freeing atmosphere surely speaks volumes of the person curating it, and there is no doubt that Arlo's passion and care for the community she has built have facilitated that to no end. "That's the beautiful thing about music. It does create this sense of a group of people being in a room for an hour, completely outside of their circumstances and a part of something. The community-building aspect of music is something I'm really invested in."

She carries this interest beyond just her music, however. Last year saw Arlo create 'Dream Fuel', a BBC Sounds show which saw her speak with the likes of Zadie Smith, Ocean Vuong, Clairo and more, including her own friends. In building a community, she intended to offer a window into different worlds for the benefit of her own listeners. "I wanted it to be this resource for people of any age to learn and be inspired. I wanted to create this access for people to understand how it all works and for it to feel less foreign and more achievable. I wanted to give people that fuel, that sense of understanding and inspiration. Also, just to talk to people whose art I really love and respect. To be able to talk to Zadie... I remember when my dad gave me White Teeth when I was younger. It was the first book he ever gave me. To speak to someone who has been writing for so long and had such a big cultural impact, and then to speak to someone like Ocean who is nearer the beginning of his journey and is from a completely different part of the world, hearing about his ethos was great."

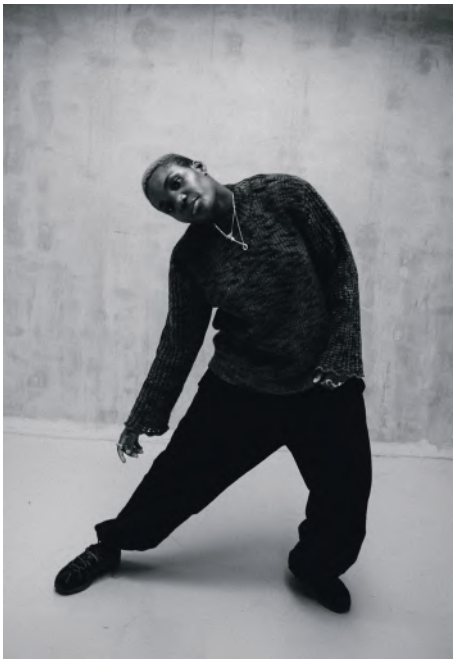
How the work of others filters into her community was deeply considered when it came to features on the album, too. Finding someone with the same values and focus on those who cherish their music led to 'Pegasus', with none other than Phoebe Bridgers.

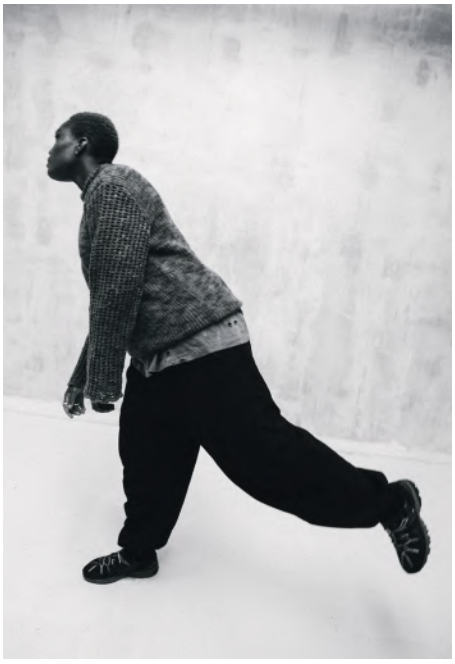
"Phoebe's music has been a part of my life for around five years now. I feel like, as a person and as an artist, she has soundtracked the majority of my career. When I thought about whose energy I wanted on my second record as my first-ever feature, there was no question about it. What she represents and the community aspect she has created through her hard work and how singular she is and how confident and soft and funny she is was a no-brainer to me."

The result is a glorious moment of two artists working in tandem – their voices entangle ethereally, a genuinely heart-wrenching display of love and care. The track is a testament to the growth of Arlo. It's a branching out, a physical manifestation of the kind, welcoming universe she has crafted for both her community and herself. Ultimately, this is Arlo Parks reborn – refreshed and grounded and clearly capable of absolute greatness. 'My Soft Machine' sees the artist at the top of her game, having completely grown into herself.

"There's something really exciting about putting out music that you feel represents you," Arlo muses. "Being able to put your marker down and say 'this is where I am now'. The music I have out now is more representative of who I was when I was a teenager. To expand in people's minds the Arlo Parks world, and to be out in the world, talking to people and sharing the music is going to be exciting. There's obviously a sense of nerves; you never know how people will receive things... but I feel confident." ■ **Arlo Parks' album 'My Soft Machine' is out 26th May.**

> *"The community-building aspect of music is something I'm really invested in"*
>
> **ARLO PARKS**







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MID



Everyone's favourite alt-pop maverick, **JAWNY** has finally dropped his debut album proper.

Words: **Steven Loftin.**

> **"The real you is gonna always shine through, so you might as well just lean into it"**
>
> **JAWNY**

JAWNY'S FEELING PRETTY GOOD RIGHT ABOUT NOW. The American pop songsmith is readying his debut album 'it's never fair, always true' for release, and as he bounds to life on Zoom with Dork, it's abundantly clear that he's one happy clam - and with good reason.

After skyrocketing to fame with his debut hit 'Honeypie' in 2019, life for Jacob Sullenger has been on an ever-increasing up and up. Some might call it fate. This is something he attests to, proclaiming, "I feel like I was born with [music], to be honest. All my earliest memories are just music-based and wanting to be a performer. My mom and everyone say the same thing; they're like, it's crazy because this is really all you literally ever wanted to do. It's just always made sense to me."

He's already got a couple of titles under his belt. With his 2020 major label debut project 'For Abby' and 2021's EP 'The Story of Hugo', he's been carving himself a nice space nestled between indie-bopper and flourishing pop star. That's not to mention his early days under the moniker Johnny Utah back before he upped sticks to LA from Philadelphia. But how the California native has dealt with the swift success has led to a blossoming confidence and one that's all rooted in the reality of the situation.

"If I was a therapist, and I was picking my brain, like, it's probably a combination of the last few years of finally finding my footing as an artist," JAWNY reckons. "Because you work really hard to become an artist, and then once you get to a point where you have some sort of success or sign to a major, that's where the work really starts."

No stranger to hard work, through his handful of projects and smatterings of singles, JAWNY's progress is deeply rooted in knowing that as each step gets closer to whatever the big picture is in his head, "you're a smaller fish and it's just a bigger pond. And you have to kind of keep going. I think that boggled my brain a little bit."

When he was young, his mum would have MTV on in the background. "It's just ingrained in my brain, and I love it," he glows. "I can't explain why. I don't know what it is; I don't know if I was dropped on my head a certain way, or something happened, or I got shook a certain way. But it's like a little bug that I haven't been able to shake."

Even in his own music videos comes a throwback to the surrealist, vivid-coloured world of MTV's mid-nineties years. But for all this focused drive comes something JAWNY refers to as "a double-edged sword" because "it's the only thing that I'm genuinely good at in life; I've sucked at everything else," he laughs. "You give me a sketchpad and tell me to doodle - I'm shit at that. You can tell me to fucking direct a music video - I'm shit at that. But, for some reason, music just has always connected for me. I don't think it's going anywhere anytime soon."

It's why in his own offerings, no matter what it's dealing with, be it unrequited love or general shenanigans, there's a sense of carefree fun. One that breathes throughout every hooky chorus or bop-worthy beat. Garnering his success and the gazillion streams that come alongside becoming an overnight success, what would he do if all the fans and success disappeared?

"I have those conversations with myself," he says. "If everything went away tomorrow, would I still be doing the same thing I was doing when I was 19, where I had a job, and I was making shitty money, but I was still making and writing music because I loved it; I wasn't even putting it out into the world. I was just doing it because I liked doing it."

Taking it a bit further, he continues. "There's the follow-up question of, what if you lost everything tomorrow, and there was a 100% sure thing that said you'll never make it in music again; nothing will ever connect again. Not a single listener will ever hear it again. Would you still like to make it just for yourself? And I would. As long as I answer yes to those two questions, always, I know I'm in a good place mentally about everything."

As with all good stories, 'it's never fair, always true' began at the end. "I have to know how it ends, or I need to know what happens in the middle." And where 'it's never fair' ends up is 'Selfish Hate', a seven-minute number that embraces its inner emo and tussles with the breakdown of love. The tracks unleashing comes from a road travelled throughout the album surrounded by laments of, to, and for love. And this is all by design. Because for JAWNY, it's all he knows.

"No shade to anyone else who does this, but there are a billion different ways to make an album, and they're all great." He doesn't subscribe to producing a heaving stack of tracks to dwindle down to a lucky handful, or disappearing into the wilderness to return with an opus. "That's a little harder for me to do because, as a storyteller and a songwriter, I don't have the motivation to keep writing music if I don't know what it's about, right? I have to have a direction that I'm going in. I'm not the guy you bring into a room like Ryan Tedder, who can just write a hit off of nothing. I can do that at times, but I really do need to have a direction I'm going. Anything I write, as far as a bigger piece of music or project - they're not necessarily concept pieces, but there's always a through-line narrative. There's always like a start to finish."

'It's never fair' follows this same pattern. He does admit that there has been some growth, though. "The biggest difference between those two [projects] is maturity and song maturity, and making things bigger and better and more complex." This is what makes 'it's never fair' his first album proper, as opposed to another mixtape. There are no skits or loosely tying bits together. This is a fully bonafide album. Featuring the smash singles 'strawberry chainsaw', and 'take it back' featuring Beck, the entire tale is soundtracked by bright sounds that, even in their darkest moments, leave a little light on.

And for someone who's such a self-professed storyteller, being in LA, a city notorious for its characters and hallowed streets, must surely offer up a wealth of inspiration? "Yeah, if you go outside, it probably is!" He cackles. "I'm kind of in my house all the time."

Coming into his career in those locked-down years means JAWNY's perspective on his journey is a little different, particularly to those who cut their teeth by playing show after show. The feeling of discovering the humanity behind those incalculable streaming digits is one of the things that was missing initially. More specifically, the fact that even the songs with lesser numbers – a perishable thought in the online game – made an impact. "Before I started touring actively, I used to base if something streamed well as the sole proprietor whether a song connected with people and that would crush my mentality on if I was a good songwriter," he admits. "And it wasn't until I went on my headline tour after COVID – because we spent all those years inside, right, and I was still putting out music inside – but I couldn't tour anything. So I would see that songs that may have not done well in the streaming era of things, a whole roomful of people is still singing it, and they were connected to it, and they still love that song."

Grappling with his success is what, strangely enough, has led to even more of the gold dust. Admitting where years ago he was "trying to be cool, or trying to make music like other people were making, because I didn't think mine would ever be successful," the truth of the matter is that "you can't escape who you are."

"Even if you try to be somebody else and packaged differently, the real you is gonna always shine through, so you might as well just lean into it," he smiles.

"I think that's why my music always has that weird rub, or shine to it that people associate with me because I can't really escape that. I can't make a Phoebe Bridgers record; like, would it be cool? Maybe," he continues, "but I can't make a record like Bon Iver because if I tried to, it wouldn't sound cool. A little tongue-in-cheek-ness would probably shine through. I can only make JAWNY music. I learned to accept that a lot more in the last three or four years, and I stopped running away from it." ■ **JAWNY's debut album 'it's never fair, always true' is out now.**

pop hits

From child star to pop powerhouse: **SABRINA CARPENTER** has broken free, found her voice and is embracing honesty and relishing in the nonsense on her latest album ‘Emails I Can’t Send’.

WORDS: **ALI SHUTLER.**
PHOTOS: **SARAH LOUISE BENNETT.**





ABRINA CARPENTER HAS BEEN IN THE SPOTLIGHT FOR OVER A DECADE NOW. The 23-year-old first became a household name in 2014 via the Disney Channel's coming-of-age show Girl Meets World and hasn't stopped being a star since.

There's been a string of TV and film appearances alongside a series of sugary pop records. Sabrina also had a short-lived career as a Broadway actor in the Mean Girls musical, playing Cady Heron (Lindsay Lohan's character) for two performances at the August Wilson Theatre in New York before COVID shut down live theatre.

Despite spending her teenage years as a shiny Disney teen star, Sabrina's first album away from Disney's Hollywood Records, 'Emails I Can't Send', isn't a rebellious reclamation of her identity. Well, not deliberately, anyway.

Sure, Sabrina Carpenter recently left BBC Radio 1 a little red-faced after changing the lyrics to her viral smash 'Nonsense' during a Live Lounge session ("How quickly can you take your clothes off, pop quiz. I'm American I am not British, so BBC it stands for something different"), but the smart, funny pop record sees her understanding herself a little better, rather than taking on a whole new persona. "I just learned not to force things," she explains.

Sabrina agrees that the album is "quite different" from what's come before, though. "I didn't feel like there was anybody limiting what I could or couldn't do or say," she offers. "With 'Emails', I felt very free to do exactly what I wanted to do. I was able to steer the ship." It's something she believes every artist should be allowed to do, but Sabrina doesn't really blame her previous label for not giving her complete creative control. "I didn't even trust my own voice back then," she admits.

Sabrina released her debut single, the ukulele-driven 'Can't Blame A Girl For Trying', when she was just 14 before debut album 'Eyes Wide Open' came the following year. "[I was] too young. When your voice hasn't gone through puberty, maybe you shouldn't be making music," she suggests, explaining that listening back to old songs just leaves her asking, "why?"

"I do think everything happens for a reason, though. I wouldn't have this album if I didn't have those early projects," she adds. "I'm more sure of the person that I am and the music I want to make now. The stuff before was still a version of me, but I was just so young."

Despite the already-eclectic musical back catalogue and impressive acting resume, the release of 'Emails' last year felt like the beginning of something special for Sabrina.

"I don't want to jinx anything," she starts, eager not to get carried away by the millions of listeners and the ever-expanding list of sold-out headline shows that have followed. "I just feel very lucky that this is the album that is resonating with people because it's the one that feels the most like me. That might be the greatest feeling in the world."

Sabrina goes on to say that the raw honesty of 'Emails' has "helped me trust myself a lot more, and I've opened myself up to a lot more possibilities now. That's very special for a 23-year-old who's constantly asking themselves, 'who am I, and what am I doing?' It's been very inspiring," she beams before taking a pause.

"I basically just said I inspire myself, didn't I?" Her head goes into her hands, and she admits, "I would hate me if I read that in an interview." It's charmingly self-aware.

In her defence, Sabrina Carpenter is in need of a nap. She flew into London less than 24 hours ago and is leaving again in a few days. The jetlag is hitting hard, and the brain fog isn't helped by the fact that the fancy hotel's idea of a snack is lettuce and hummus. "Me saying 'I inspire myself' really was the tip of the iceberg," she later quips. You have to respect her pun game.

It's been a minute since her last proper day off, and things have "definitely been intense" since 'Emails I Can't Send' was released in July. "It's getting more exciting and fun as the days go on, though," Sabrina grins. "I might not know what day it is, but I keep finding reasons to be very grateful. It's been a whirlwind, but in a good way."

WITH HER STINT on Broadway cut short and with all her usual creative outlets also off the table, Sabrina spent the first few months of lockdown writing emails to herself to understand what she was feeling. "It was a way to vent and not harbour a lot of those emotions," she explains.

At first, she felt like she was going crazy. Over time though, she realised she was being 100% honest with herself for the first time. She wasn't using this therapy as an exercise in songwriting until she wrote what would become the title track. "As soon as I wrote 'Emails I Can't Send', everything clicked into place," Sabrina tells Dork. "That song was me vomiting words onto paper rather than worrying about making sure the pre-chorus was catchy. It was so nice to write a song that I thought no one ever had to hear. Then I realised I wish I was writing every song with that freedom." She then worked backwards through the songs she'd already written, making sure they were as honest and real as possible. It was a process that was both "really cathartic and really confusing".

"It felt like I was exhaling," she explains.

The 13 tracks are all very different, but across the record, "there's this theme of saying things that you're scared to say out loud. It felt like a really interesting concept for an album that ended up capturing a turning point in my life."

The result is a record that's unashamedly vulnerable. "I feel like I didn't have a choice [with that]," says Sabrina. "At a certain point, if you don't just rip off the band-aid, you'll end up lying to yourself forever, and that's no fun. It also felt nice to just let go and not be concerned about what people are going to think or how they're going to perceive you."

Ten years in the spotlight, Sabrina knows people will judge her whatever

> **"I feel very lucky that this is the album that is resonating with people, because it's the one that feels the most like me"**
>
> **SABRINA CARPENTER**







At a certain point, if you don't just rip off the band-aid, you'll end up lying to yourself forever, and that's no fun"

SABRINA CARPENTER

she does. "[It happens] even if you give them a fake version of yourself, so you may as well just be real with yourself. That's the way for me to be the most happy."

Take the fuzzy angst of 'Because I Liked A Boy'. There's been constant speculation that Sabrina wrote it after the public backlash that followed her supposed relationship with fellow Disney star and rumoured Olivia Rodrigo-ex Joshua Bassett ('Driving License' is apparently about him), but no one involved has ever confirmed anything.

However, the track was definitely inspired by real-life events and sees Sabrina talk about being labelled a "homewrecker" and a "slut" alongside the death threats she got, all because she "liked a boy".

"Tell me who I am, guess I don't have a choice," she adds.

Talking to Dork, Sabrina explains how that song champions the idea that "making mistakes is a real thing that does happen."

"It's been so cool to see that track take off," she continues. "When I wrote that song, I knew I loved it, but I didn't know if a single person was going to relate to it because it was so specific. It's me telling a very detailed story from start to finish. To watch the way that young girls, young boys from all over the world relate to it in their own way has been really wonderful. It has honestly inspired me to be even more fearless."

Prior to 'Because I Liked A Boy', Sabrina spent most of her life "really taking other people into consideration and doing whatever I could to make them the most comfortable. It always made me uncomfortable," she admits. "For the first time, I chose to actually care about myself, and that was very liberating."

"There's this unintentional honesty to the entire record," explains Sabrina. "Those were the things that I felt most connected with and compelled to say." Safe in the knowledge that none of the songs she was writing ever actually had to come out, "there was no 'too much' for this album," she admits. "I don't think I held back, and I'm happy I didn't."

That fearlessness wasn't deliberate, but "when you get so tired of people, you start to peel off layers of not caring," says Sabrina. For 'Emails', she had a newfound attitude that saw her telling herself, "'you've got to just live your life and not put so much pressure on yourself. You can do things for fun'."

Prior to release, someone tried suggesting Sabrina call it 'Letters' instead of 'Emails'. Their logic? The album didn't tackle issues of technology. She quickly dismissed them. "[It] was a little thing, but being really sure of my own thoughts and opinions was a big step for me."

Telling the story now, it all sounds very brave, but Sabrina spent four days before turning the finished record in with her finger over the 'delete all' button. "I didn't want anyone to hear any of it, and I was very scared." Then some friends reminded her how special it felt and how much it sounded like her. After that, the nerves turned into excitement. "At a certain point, I went, 'these are all bangers, and I want people to hear them'."

And people have heard them. As it stands, every track on the album has been streamed at least 10 million times, with 'Nonsense' charting both sides of the Atlantic. "The coolest thing has been people that maybe didn't really listen to my music before, or didn't think they ever should, hearing this album."

"I feel like people really appreciate honesty and transparency," she says of why 'Emails' has resonated with so many people. "I think it's so easy to tell the things that are honest, versus not. I think, for whatever reason, there's just like a little magical pixie dust that goes into the things where you're telling the truth. People can sense that."

Despite all the bone-scratching honesty on 'Emails', there is a real rom-com feel to the record, which suits Sabrina just fine. "That's kinda my life." She goes on to say that humour is "so important" to who she is as a person and an artist. "That was the thing that made my friends go, 'oh, this is your album because no one else would say the things that you do'."

"I also deal with pain with humour. Those things coexist in my life," explains Sabrina. "Humour has saved me from not taking things so seriously or letting things really ruin me."

Case in point, it takes less than 90 seconds for Sabrina to call an unfaithful ex a "dipshit" on 'Emails', which is perhaps the most underused of insults.

"I'm shocked it hasn't had more of a spotlight. I was really trying to kickstart a resurgence," she admits, tongue firmly in cheek. "One of my favourite things about my tour was seeing people buy these dipshit hats. It was so funny seeing 8-year-old kids at a show with dipshit on their head, knowing that their parents had bought it for them."

A lot of the joke lines on the record started as throwaway lyrics that Sabrina was going to come back and revisit, but she quickly realised that her first instinct was the most natural. "I almost called the album something else," admits Sabrina. This







> **There's a little magical pixie dust that goes into the things where you're telling the truth. People can sense that"**
>
> **SABRINA CARPENTER**

alternative title was to do with "the way that I use humour to navigate things and how sometimes, that's the better way to say something rather than taking yourself too seriously." She won't give away anything else in case she wants to use the title for a future project.

Speaking of jokes, breakout track 'Nonsense' is full of them. The giddy, Ariana Grande-inspired track quickly became a viral sensation last year and remains a radio mainstay. "I wish I could be like, 'I felt the magic in the room and my life changing' when we wrote that song, but honestly, I had no idea. I was in a very silly mood, and there was something about it that happened so effortlessly. It was almost like I didn't even realise we wrote a song that day until I listened back to it."

"That song is really Sabrina-fied top to bottom," she continues. Every lyric feels like something she'd say in the real world, and the song "captures exactly how I get when I have a crush on someone. It's a hard feeling to encapsulate without sounding too cheesy or ridiculously cringy," she adds.

FOR 'EMAILS I CAN'T SEND', Sabrina took influence from the "great female songwriters" she grew up on; Carole King, Dolly Parton, Joni Mitchell and Fiona Apple. "There's a lot of newer artists that inspire me too, but I have a hard time taking influence from them because whatever they're doing, is being done," she admits. "I wasn't trying to reinvent the classics, but I definitely pulled inspiration from them for sure."

It means Sabrina's fifth album "doesn't really have one specific genre". It's opened up the door for what comes next as well. "There are so many possibilities now. I love that pop music has become everything. When I was younger, it was very easy to feel like you had to choose one style and stick with it. Thank god people don't believe that anymore."

That said, there's one genre Sabrina knows she's not going to toy with. "If I can tell you one thing, I'm not going to make a rock record."

Before she starts to record anything new, though, Sabrina is gearing up to release a batch of songs written at the same time as 'Emails' but weren't included on the album for a variety of different reasons.

"I've been very specific about what fits into the world of this album, because it means so much to me. This era is so special to me, and [whatever's coming] is an extension of the record."

She describes the songs as touching on "the thoughts that shouldn't have made it, but now they get a chance to see the light of day, which is interesting. I'm nervous about that, but I've just felt so encouraged by the fans that have really loved the album that I feel like I owe them a treat."

"I don't want to see what anyone makes of anything, though. I'm going to close my eyes," she laughs. "I can't wait to sing these new songs at the shows with them. I've been living with them for a while now, and it feels like I'm finally letting them in on some secrets that maybe I wasn't so sure of before."

Sabrina Carpenter is about to start her second North American headline tour of the 'Emails' era. A brief run of South American shows kicks off in spring before a European tour follows. In total, she's playing at least 58 shows, including her first-ever UK headline shows. The four-date run is completely sold out, and Sabring doesn't want to upgrade them from venues like Hammersmith Apollo because "I think it's really important not to skip any steps".

"I'm already tired," she laughs. "I love performing so much, and it is a lot on your body,

> **As soon as I wrote 'Emails I Can't Send', everything clicked into place"**
>
> **SABRINA CARPENTER**

but the music is really healing."

So far, the shows have been like a big party. "Everyone has a great attitude, a great time, and we're all looking out for each other. It's a very safe space. I also feel like I can just be myself on stage, and I can say whatever comes to my mind. That's scary but also necessary. It brings me a lot closer to the people that come to the shows. It's a very loving environment" - even with a chunk of the audience wearing dipshit hats.

She's excited about hitting the road. "I like people to see that everything is actually happening live. I love the energy of how excited people get when they watch someone do the thing they love as well. That's really special and isn't something you can recreate anywhere else."

Sabrina has pretty much always wanted to sing and act. She watched Hannah Montana and The Wizard Of Oz on repeat as a child, knowing she wanted to do something similar. But those dreams have been achieved, so what's next?

"The cool thing about it all is that it evolves forever. Art is constantly turning into new things all the time. I don't feel like I've been sitting in a cubicle for 10 years doing the same thing; it feels like I've been doing something different every single day. I think I'll be doing this for a long time."

Despite the success of the music, she wants to keep acting as long as she feels "connected to the project and compelled to do it. Music is obviously such a huge part of my life and takes up a lot of time and space. And you need space in order to live, in order to create things that feel special and real. It all feels a bit like a giant puzzle for me right now, but I definitely haven't stopped."

"It's actually a very annoying trait, the wanting to do it all," she adds. "I just love making things, though." ■ **Sabrina Carpenter will tour the UK in June.**



SWEET D

Now on their fourth album and with a well-earned reputation for indie bangers, Aussie trio **DMA'S** are living the dream.



Words: **Steven Loftin.** Photo: **Roman Jody.**

DREAMS

> **DMA'S can do any genre at this point"**
>
> **JOHNNY TOOK**

"THE BEAUTIFUL THING ABOUT BEING A MUSICIAN IS IT NEVER ENDS. You're never like, 'Oh, I did it. I nailed music'. Well, no, it doesn't work like that." Swiftly defining the ethos of his band's ever-changing sound, DMA'S guitarist Johnny Took, along with vocalist Tommy O'Dell and guitarist Matthew Mason, are primed for the future with their fourth outing, 'How Many Dreams?'.

"DMA'S can kind of do any genre at this point, which is cool," Johnny mentions with a relieved look. "And which I find liberating."

The Aussie trio first came to prominence with a Britpop-soaked throwback sound on their 2016 debut 'Hill's End'. They wound up swiftly capturing the hearts and minds of those looking to relive that heady time and those dying to experience the faintest glimpse of what it may have been like. But that was then. DMA'S have moved on. And while this will always be a part of them, they're ready for more.

DMA'S began recording 'How Many Dreams?' with producer Stuart Price (The Killers, Dua Lipa) in London for a couple of weeks, but soon after returning home, the Omicron variant started spreading. So, when they found some dissatisfaction with the sound due to it being "too much like a band in a room", they went into a studio in Sydney, where the rest of the album was pieced together with the due care and attention of seasoned veterans. Which is all a sign of the DMA'S times.

Admitting that, "It could have been easy for us to have come home from London and gone. Oh, that's the album and just got it mixed," the trio know they want more than that. They didn't want any phoning-it-in going on. Though he does admit that "maybe if we were younger, we would have done that. We knew at that point that it wasn't good enough yet. And that wasn't the sound we wanted to do at this stage in our career."

Album four is indeed when the road opens up a bit wider for a band. The debut is the statement piece, the follow-up is often charged with building upon this without losing traction, and number three is the odd one where changes begin to take shape. But four? You're ready for anything, fully confident in yourself, as is the DMA'S way.

'When we did [2020's] 'The Glow' with Stuart, it was the first record we've done that has been less of a throwback album," says Johnny. "Our albums before that were kind of 90s guitar throwback records. Stuart brought us into the modern-day music scene, and we learned a lot from him, and then we got to take the skills we've learned and experiment with them during the lockdown time. So then, when it came to recording, I feel like we put more of our own touch into this record."

'How Many Dreams?' certainly has the aura of an album that's been studiously picked over, and where you sit on the DMA'S fan scale will impact how it'll sit with you. There's a little something for everyone, but this is a band toting a big sound with even bigger ambitions, and there's no room for a note out of place. "The extra time that gave us the ability to give that attention to detail made a big difference," Johnny confirms.

Growth is an important part of being in a band. But when you're also levied with the expectations of fans, "you get a little bit of a kickback, [but] I find this happens with every band," Johnny says. "A few people go, 'why don't you sound like your first record?' But the truth is, if you just kept making your first record again and again and again, they'd get bored and go listen to someone else. So I think subconsciously, even if some of them don't know it, they like it when the sound changes because it means they get to grow with the band, and I think that's really important."

With ever-increasing success can come even internal pressures. It's an understandable, if often unpleasant, facet of striking gold. To keep their hearts and minds away from such nosy intrusions, Johnny mentions one key ingredient. "One of my goals every morning is just to wake up and remember how I felt when I was 16 years old and I first started writing songs," he says. "That love and the magic that I found in songwriting. If I focus on that, the rest just comes along with it. The moment you start thinking about, 'Oh, you know, I want to do Wembley Arena next year, we've got to be able to fill those seats, I'm gonna write a song like this', that becomes too contrived. People see through that straight away. So that's one thing we're conscious of, not forgetting why you love it."

Building up from the bare bones for 'How Many Dreams?', it was about mining that creative spark in the initial demos. They then set out to construct a castle made of bangers and "building up properly and figuring out what sounds can make it better, as opposed to starting from scratch every time." It's something Johnny enthuses for everyone to have a go at, since "it's great that you can do it because people are making Top 10 records in the bedroom these days!"

Dealing in bangers of all shapes and sizes, what this looks like to DMA'S is a constantly moving idea. "It's always changing for me. When I was younger, I was adamant about having all these different parts to a song, you know, you need a great riff; great verse; great pre-chorus; great chorus; great middle-eight; and a great outro," he explains. "And I wanted them each to be unique and different and whatnot." Long gone are those days (though the elements still sit nicely amongst this future-focused vision), and in testament to this, the album closer 'De Carle' goes into full-on dance mode. "That sounds like that's a banger to me, and that's pretty much just nearly two chords the whole time."

"My thoughts of what I think is cool or what I find inspiring change all the time. Maybe four years ago or two years ago, I was obsessed with, like, dance beats, right? And now whenever I write a song, I refuse to put a dance beat on the track... It's kind of like, baggy jeans or something," he laughs. "When I was 18, I used to wear tight jeans. And now I couldn't think of anything worse than wearing tight jeans, but then they'll come back in again."

Given DMA'S' start was shrouded in a Britpop revivalist cloud, the due care and attention may be a missed facet of the group, but bops don't just drop from the heavens; they take work and dedication. Do DMA'S think they're underestimated?

"I've never really thought about it," Johnny shrugs lightly. "We just focus on what we're doing; work hard, write songs every day. And the fans keep buying records and keep buying tickets, and we keep doing it. But whether or not we're underestimated, it's not really for me to judge."

So, what is the secret sauce that makes this DMA'S' amalgamation of bouncy Britpop and raucous raving so good? "To be honest, man, we're kind of just making it up as we go along," Johnny chuckles. While a fair enough response, the fact that they can let their little musical atoms bounce around at high velocity until bangers like 'Everybody's Saying Thursday's The Weekend' form, is quite marvellous. Though there is one little tidbit that helps. "The first thing, which has never changed, and hasn't changed since the first record, is that we just try and write great songs," he smiles. 'Nuff said, really. ■ **DMA'S' album 'How Many Dreams?' is out 31st March.**



LIKE WILD!

Personal trauma, female rage and a refusal to stick to one lane - **BLACK HONEY**'s 'A Fistful of Peaches' is a record ready to punch back. Hard.

WORDS + PHOTOS: **JAMIE MACMILLAN.**



THERE'S AN OLD SAYING about how stars, real stars, can light up a room as soon as they enter it; their personality and charm instantly shining from deep within them. That is most definitely the case today in a photo studio near Brixton, London, as the various members of Black Honey begin to drift in. Dressed head to paw in a beautiful, luxurious white coat and taking her place in front of the camera like she was born to do this, this is Zero the dog's hour, and she will do whatever it takes to take the spotlight away from a band who are gunning for another chart success with their third album, 'A Fistful Of Peaches'.

The momentum is strong going into this. After their spiky self-titled debut album only just sneaked into the charts on its release back in 2018, the pendulum swung wildly in the opposite direction for the follow-up 'Written & Directed'. Kicking the doors in at Number 7, its (deserved) success came as much of a surprise to the band as anyone. "Oh, we had peak imposter syndrome," laughs frontperson Izzy Bee Phillips as Dork catches up with the band down the pub post-shoot. "We just felt that we had blagged it somehow, like what is going on??"

The celebrations for that came at a strange and troubled time, however, for both the band and everyone else. Externally, the world was limping back to post-Covid normality, but the group were still wrestling with the repercussions of their guitarist Chris Ostler suffering from a serious injury - a herniated disc in his neck had affected his spinal cord severely, and he was admitted to hospital for emergency surgery after beginning to lose mobility. As the band announced in terrifying detail some months later, his surgeon had warned him prior that the worst-case scenario was permanent paralysis.

The guitarist is in top form during our photoshoot but leaves the interview to the others. And although the band are plainly still concerned for their friend's health, they say today that it has given them a whole new perspective. "I think it's made us better people," admits Izzy before drummer Alex Woodward continues. "You never think it's gonna be you," he says. "And then, when it does happen to you, it's like, fuck. It becomes even more important to be personable or in touch with the people supporting you because everyone's going through the same shit."

"We're a group of four people and this horrible health thing happened to one of us," chips in bassist Tommy Taylor thoughtfully. "I'm sure for everyone in a group of four people or family, this is the kind of shit that happens to everyone; it's almost a reminder to respect and reflect, I guess - you never know what people have got going on in their lives."

> "We had peak imposter syndrome"
>
> IZZY BEE PHILLIPS

Describing having Chris back in the band as "like a miracle", Izzy also considers how it has changed their viewpoint. "People have so much shit in their lives that you don't ever think about or even acknowledge," she says. "Their lives are so difficult and complex that it reminds you of everyone's humanity and makes you more kind."

All of this personal emotional trauma came on top of what had already been a horrendous year for, well, everyone. Izzy had found it largely impossible to write during lockdown, the only exception being the darkly vulnerable 'Nobody Knows', its lyrics detailing the still all-too-familiar memories of staring at four walls and contemplating planes flying overhead with nobody inside. But that was it, as she describes a period where nothing could inspire her to write. The band did what everybody else did, of course, jumping on livestreams



to keep their all-important fan community strong and together.

"I think we got closer to a lot of people that listen to our music then," remembers Tommy. "You got in the habit of doing them and speaking to these people. I hated them." "You mean you hated the Zooms, not speaking to the people, right?" checks Izzy quickly on accidental cancellation watch before concluding, "I think it's the final death of the separation between artists and fans."

After the success of 'Written & Directed', another unexpected obstacle creeping up on the band quickly was a sense of expectation and the easy temptation to do it again. But 'A Fistful Of Peaches' swerves it totally. "There was so much chaotic artistry that went into album two that it would have been hard to do again," explains Izzy. "I love that one of my biggest critiques is that I don't do one thing and that I'm doing too many. One day it's disco, and currently I'm having a post-punk era, obviously. It's just impossible for me to do the same thing twice; I can't even sing the same vocal take twice, let alone write songs that are coherent!"

"I think the great people who do really well just move around," continues Alex. "If you stay safe, it's exactly that. Safe. What's next? What can you do to invigorate that next thing that you want to do? A lot of the time, you move around [in genre] subconsciously, and, hopefully, it all ties together in the end."

Even in these genre-blurring days, Black Honey stand out as one of those acts who like to skip around loose ideas of indie, pop and rock. So what kind of band do they see themselves as? "All of those, yeah, but a guitar band through and through," says Izzy. "We flirted with pushing pop, and it didn't land exactly how we wanted. But at the heart of it, these are still kind of pop songs but just dressed up in a guitar band way."

This album may see them move in a new direction again, but that doesn't mean it's the end of their love of vintage culture. "We'll always love that!" states Izzy. "Looking back with rose-tinted glasses is something that's just been permanently injected into my veins since Lana Del Rey existed, and I fell in love with all of that. But there's nothing creative about playing it safe."

That word again. "Safe" feels like a dangerous word in Black Honey's world. "I remember being drunk backstage with Florence Welch once," she continues (we've all been there). "And I said I don't feel like I fit in anywhere. I feel like too much of a drag queen for rock and roll, and too much of a weirdo rock character for pop music. And she just said, 'If you're not fitting in anywhere, then



you're doing something right'. That's the only space you need to be in."

As festivals and gigs came back to life in 2021, so did Izzy's songwriting mojo, and by the end of summer, the show had limped back onto the road. She had begun therapy during lockdown and had been exploring and growing her self-awareness of just how her neurodivergent personality affected her day-to-day life. "I think I'm getting better at understanding my causes or the bits about me that I didn't necessarily know, but everyone else does," she states. "But doing therapy comes slowly; it takes ages, and it's really fucking long and hard. I'm not one of those people who can be like, 'oh my gawd, I went to therapy, and now I've made this amazing record'. I'm 100% not done with therapy, but it has definitely given me the ability to access pain in ways that mean I can be held safely and show vulnerability around other people. Which is quite intimidating when you're a songwriter."

When approaching the writing of the album, she says she knew where she wanted it to go - but it wasn't going to be easy to explore. "It was very heavy duty this time," she remembers. "I wanted to go in deeper on subjects, and I wanted it to have to gravity. It was a feeling of, if you're gonna put art out into the world after lockdown then it's got to have a purpose or mean something important."

With therapy opening doors in her mind, things began to click into place. "Having to really wake up my subconscious was a big curveball," she says. "If the last album was making a fantasy world where you could be a villain and protect yourself with huge shields of caricatures, then this album is what happens if you just rip that away like a plaster, finding out what was actually underneath the persona."

If the images and vistas that Black Honey regularly summon could seem to have leapt out of a Quentin Tarantino movie, then 'A Fistful Of Peaches' is instead embedded in the real world - one where there is more than enough drama and nastiness to go around already, thank you very much.

Even the sound of the band is different this time, their trademark 60s surf rock guitar replaced (for the time being at least) by what Izzy describes today as "2007 indie sleaze cheese", something she says the group have embraced fully. "There's fun and humour and a lack of apology in doing something that isn't as cool as you've made before," she says. "As well as also having it be a big rock anthem that can also be a love song. But we've made it modern and for the female lens instead of that over-done and over-exhausted male perspective, which just isn't interesting as a listener any more. I don't find any joy in listening to anything that's just traditional white man rock; it's exciting to see women and non-binary people coming through. It's unlocking a whole other perspective, like a breath of fresh air."

She's excited, talking about the current scene and the way it is diversifying as it progresses. "I feel like I can relate to it all better", she says, "There is space for people like me, and I think that anything that is trying to create space in rock for queer music to exist in a way that's cool as fuck is really empowering."

One of the standout tracks on the record, 'I'm A Man', is equally as empowering in its own way. Playing with listeners' expectations in the same way as Nirvana's grunge classic 'Polly', it puts the listener into the mind of the man who is a sexual predator, and worse with its chorus-slash-threat of 'I'll do what I want 'cos remorse isn't my thing / Equal I mean, no such thing it's survival'. Izzy remembers it now as one of the toughest days in the studio. "I guess when you're a bit scared to say something, that's when you know that you're saying something important," she says now. "Because it probably means it's more honest and vulnerable."

As we chat, even though she can look back at it with more distance, it's obvious that the anger behind the track hasn't disappeared. "I needed to get that off my chest in a way, but it's just being fucking real about the actual reality," she explains. "A couple of my friends experienced sexual assault recently and spoke to me about it. And in the space of a month, I know seven fucking people that have been raped, and that's just part of normal day-to-day life."

> "When you're scared, that's when you know that you're saying something important"
>
> IZZY BEE PHILLIPS

Having watched Michaela Coel's 'I May Destroy You', with its exploration of just where the lines and boundaries of sexual assault begin, Izzy's eyes were opened even further. "I still wake up some days and remember an encounter," she says. "And now I'm annoyed about that because I've realised it was a fucking sexual assault. I'm angry that I'm now woke enough to know what it is. I didn't realise that taking a condom off during sex without consent is fully rape. It's not consensual, and consent is sexy, and that's the bottom line."

The track also refers to someone 'holding her drink to her chest like a Bible', a nod towards what Izzy calls the "boys will be boys" excuses that get rolled out. "'Her skirt was too short; she brought it on herself'," she mimics before continuing. "I blamed myself for everything that happened to me. And I've got plenty of friends who have opened up to me since these conversations, and I'm really fucking angry on their behalf as well. I definitely worked in pubs where the chef used to grope my ass, and girls used to take turns to do the chef run so we could avoid being groped. These were all things that were part of being a woman day-to-day. And I'm angry about those undertones that have been normalised for entire lifetimes. It's weird that girls have to wear skirts to school, and then get told off it it's too short. Well, if you don't want the kid to wear it too short, let them wear fucking trousers!"





> I wanted to go in deeper on subjects, and I wanted it to have to gravity"
>
> IZZY BEE PHILLIPS

She hopes the song will be empowering. "Imagine if a girl could put that song on her headphones and walk to school and be empowered to say 'no, what happened to me yesterday wasn't appropriate'."

"If it makes one boy or man or anyone think differently about the way they speak to a woman, then it's a good thing," continues Tommy. "It's not always just your stereotypical person; it could be anyone. And that's the scary thing."

Elsewhere, 'Charlie Bronson' explores female rage and the damaging way it is portrayed by the wider culture. "I really have a gripe with the kind of mono-nature that women have to be this kind of one-dimensional character," Izzy explains. "Now films and stuff like that are really exciting because they are exploring more nuance to women. And 'Charlie' is me just being able to say, I have got this tapped side to me that is totally nuts."

She traces her love of Tarantino movies back to his empowering female characters, the flawed and complex parts that only men traditionally got to portray on screen. Her mum was also vitally important, being largely responsible for what Izzy describes as a "non-binary experience" of growing up - where nothing was out of bounds, and no gender expectations or limits were placed.

"I found it really hard to understand that people had such binary perspectives of gender," she remembers. "All because of what had been imposed on them and what they needed to reject. I never needed to reject any gender elements because I was never imposed as 'my' gender. Just having that starting point with my mum really not caring about what gender constructs were; it allowed me to express my masculinity in a safe way."

Playing with expectations has been a huge part of Izzy's personality within the band, and is something she explored during the earlier photoshoot with a range of outfits all reflecting different parts of her personality. "My therapist says that there's a village of people that live within us, and I got obsessed with that quote as soon as she said it," she states. "A lot of Black Honey is about me exploring different personas, parts and facets of me. Every part of my personality is valid, and it's all real!"

Having lived long-term with various neurodivergent diagnoses (Izzy was diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD during childhood), going through therapy and producing 'A Fistful Of Peaches' has resulted in Izzy learning to understand herself and her needs even more. "I have an amazing support network," she smiles. "People always say to me, 'you're smashing it', but I wish they could see how hard the bad shit is, or how hard it is for me to leave the house or get somewhere on time. Not getting lost is a daily fucking problem for me, or saying inappropriate shit, or offending people, or having horrific meltdowns in public.

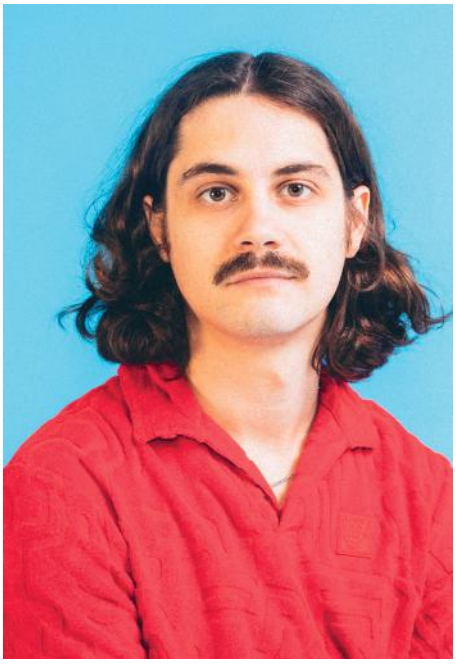
"Trying to function in a society that isn't designed for people who are neurodivergent, who are on the spectrum, or have learning difficulties, is exhausting... And it's something I know that I'm gonna have with my brain for the rest of my life. I would honestly give away all of my talent to just be able to live a normal, functional and happy life. But I can't do that! So I have to make the most of what I've got...."

Just as Izzy begins to explain how it affects how people see her, and whether they think it is part of her whole stage persona, a kerfuffle unfolds. There's a fine balance between Black Honey and all of its members, each capable of saying something wonderfully profound one second and then losing the plot seconds later. Here, it's Alex' turn to unravel as he tries to quietly remove the head of his pint. Now, we can't stress enough how weird this is; he does this by blowing at it with the force of a thousand five-year-olds at a birthday party and dumping about a quarter of it into the air and over the balcony. "One for the guys who aren't with us any more," he shrugs to general bafflement and bemusement, the band breaking into hysterics.

After regaining her composure, Izzy reflects on moments like 'Up Against It' and 'Weirdos', where she turns many of her lived experiences into something more positive. The former could almost be a letter to her younger self, a reminder to 'Breathe in, breathe out / Just take a minute' and a message to the listener that 'school isn't the be-all and end-all'. 'Weirdos', meanwhile, is a triumphant call-to-arms for the outsiders and those who don't fit the 'mainstream'. "I was told I was a naughty kid, that I was badly behaved, that I was problematic," she remembers. "I was always the weird kid in school, always the one that was a bit tapped or that everyone was a bit scared of. But there's an entire community and world out there where you can celebrate being exactly who you are. And who you are is fucking perfect."

Laughing at her own "live, laugh, love bullshit", she finishes simply. "Kids should be encouraged to celebrate their individuality, and people should be allowed to be whoever the fuck they want to be."

Songs like 'Rock Bottom', 'Cut The









People should be allowed to be whoever the fuck they want to be"

IZZY BEE PHILLIPS

Cord' and 'Heavy' are exactly as you'd imagine from the titles, packed with sadness and echoes of lockdown - the latter also streaked with shades from a more specific grief at the death of their fan club leader Gavin Woollard. Izzy reveals that when she listens to those tracks now, she recognises that she was incredibly low and sad when they were written.

"'Heavy' has that feeling of when you're just like, 'I can't even fucking brush my teeth'," explains Izzy. "I can't do anything. I can't get out of bed; I can just press play on Netflix. I got so fucking annoyed with this toxic culture of people online saying they were gonna write their novels in lockdown and be the most productive ever. I found it so hard. I think I definitely and finally got in touch with the fact that I'm not necessarily the most mentally well person. I guess I'm more comfortable with being aware of that and...."

Suddenly breaking the mood, there is the soft sound of a dog's head slumping onto the pub table, Zero plainly having had enough of the chat and the limelight moving away from her as the band dissolve into giggles. "She is a very visual representation of where this conversation was going," grins Izzy. "I don't think I'm gonna write an album like this again."

Due to the nature of releasing music in the year 2023, these tracks are already more a reflection of where she was rather than where she is now, and today says she feels a lot better. Whatever world she chooses to live in or which personality she chooses to adopt for the next era, the only thing you can expect is the unexpected. ■ **Black Honey's album 'A Fistful Of Peaches' is out 17th March.**

Former Blaenavon linchpin **Ben Gregory** is laying it all out with his much-anticipated solo debut.

Words: **Steven Loftin.** Photo: **Neelam Khan Vela.**

"I like lots of different types of music," Ben Gregory deadpans, before chuckling. "That'll be good for the magazine!"

This outrageous revelation comes as he's dusting off the cobwebs of chatting to magazine scribblers. You see, the former Blaenavon frontman and Dork cover star has spent a bit of time out of the music game for various reasons - the most prominent being his search for calm and stability after going through the wringer during the past few years. With stressors coming to a head in 2019, having been in a touring band since he was 14, Ben took some much-needed time to heal.

Describing his time up until now as if he's flicking through a quick montage in his mind, "it went from the hilarious and beautiful instability of the band, never really knowing where you're going to be in maybe a month, or in a year," he starts. "And from that into, like, being very ill. Then into Covid. It's been a very, very bad three or four years. And I don't mean to be overdramatic, but I did feel like I had to start from scratch in working out how I wanted to be, how I wanted to live, and what was good for me and what wasn't."

For Ben, this looked like upping sticks and heading to Manchester to study (German and English Literature, FYI). Finding himself rooted to a timetable, and focusing on something outside of music for the first time in over a decade, led Ben down the road of being able to reckon with returning. This respite led to the building blocks of his solo debut 'Episode' taking shape.

"I managed to have some time to recover while learning a lot about my craft," he explains. "Which was cool, [and] which meant that the songs ended up being a quite disparate bunch that reflect all the different things I was working on at that time, which is hours and hours and hours of music."

'Episode' is a patchwork of all the music Ben loves. Aided in the process by Mystery Jets' Blaine Harrison and engineer Matt Thwaites, it's a staggeringly honest portrayal of self-reflection and inner turmoil while searching for hope. But perhaps more integral to this story, it was a necessity. Feeling as if this was an album he had to make, the path is a bit clearer now as he explains with a resoundingly positive tone. "Actually, that's a very astute question. That's exactly what happened; I think I wanted to make this big album with all these big statements. I wanted to get that all out there and be proud of an album as a whole," he says.

> "I had to start from scratch in working out how I wanted to be"
>
> **BEN GREGORY**

Mentioning how he wanted 'Episode' "to be big", its main job was to contain all his self-professed "stupidest ideas" in their fully fleshed-out forms. "I tried to incorporate everything that I enjoy or find great or funny, and I'm surprised at how coherent I find it. When selecting the songs, I wasn't thinking, 'Oh, which would make sense on a record together'. I just thought, this needs to come out. And then it so came to be the case that I think it has a coherent shape."

Now he's back writing more songs, instead of being a cathartic necessity, he's able to try "to hone the craft of songwriting," he says. "It has taken that turn actually after making this thing. I've stopped making fat opuses... opi? I'll say opi, because that's really funny."

One of the opuses in question is the project's second track. 'Blue Sea Blue' – 'Episode"s supposed mid-point (but in actuality is track two) – is a vast, cinematic piece that tracks through multiple genres. Opening with a jungle-infused electro gambit before wandering into flamenco-backed guitars, it trips into a vacant acoustic number, finally erupting into a crescendo of swelling indie hope and glory. Not wanting to half-arse his musical return, the song is accompanied by a suitably grand visual - and why Dork's chat with Ben had to initially be rescheduled. Regaling the video's filming, "which was like 14 hours in a palace in Prague," he explains. "With four members of the Prague ballet, one of whom was a really old school friend of mine... It was as amazing as it sounds."

All in all, this entire process has led to a brand new open door for Ben. Gushing how "some moments I look back with fondness and great pride," he says. "I think I've had a song like 'Blue Sea Blue' working away in my brain for years and years ever since I was a kid and had my dad playing 20-minute Yes songs in the car, and I was like, 'What's going on there when someone does that?'" It's hard to not empathise with Ben. It's brave enough returning to the ring for round two. But to do so with an album vast in its ideas and executed so marvellously that everything feels just right is a testament to Ben's resilience.

On returning to the musical fray, he offers up a pondering chortle before reckoning it to being "either great and the best thing ever, or just like the worst, most embarrassing joke of all time." A lot of questions had to be answered before he could properly crack on and find his feet again. And it didn't all come to a clear resolution until 'Episode' was physically in his hands. "I'd forgotten the feeling of something that you've put so much dedication in so many hours into finally being this cool-looking tangible thing. And yeah, it's my one great joy in life, making albums."

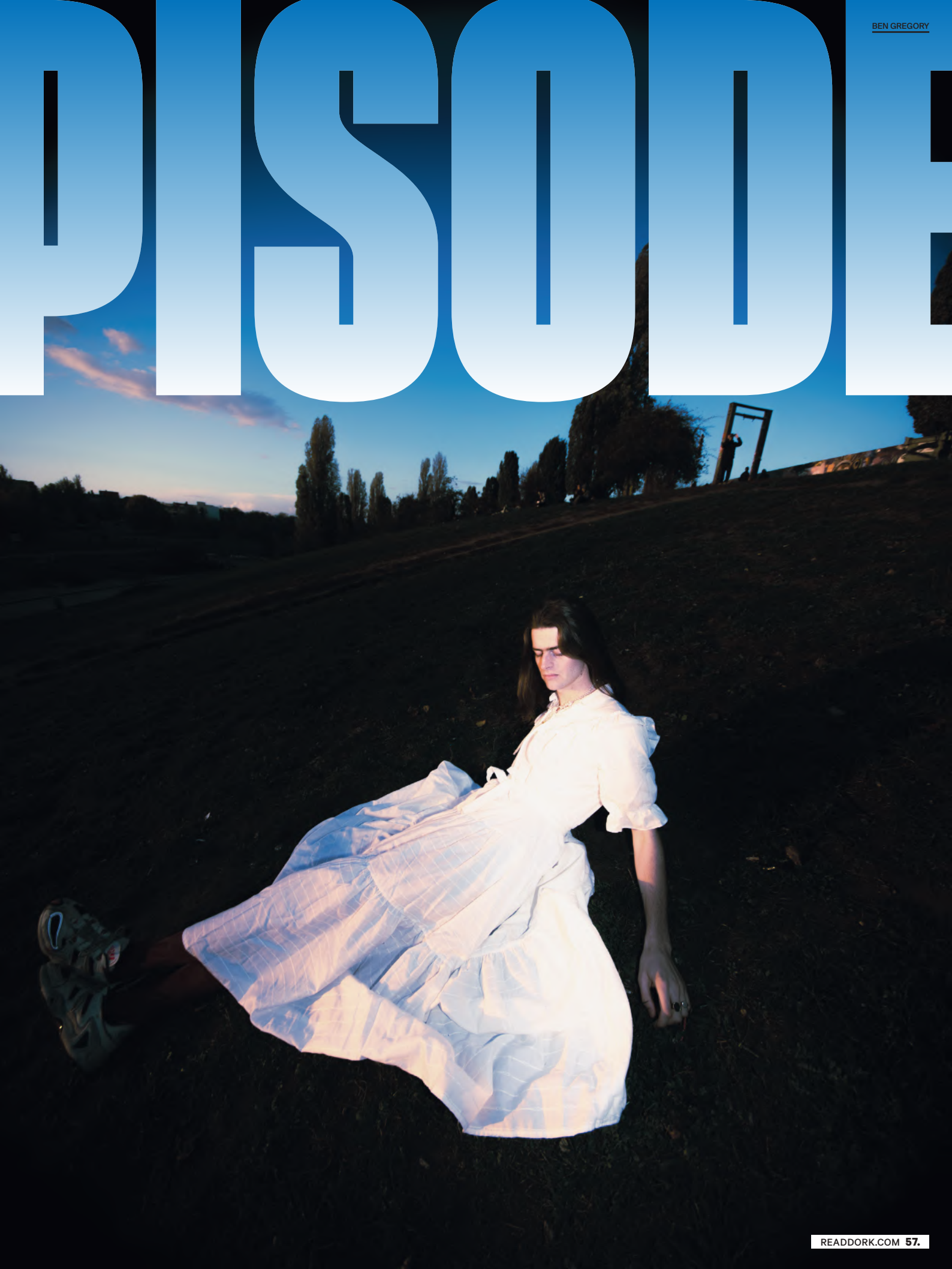
It seems plain that not making music was never an option for Ben. Harking back to when he was a kid and began mucking around on any instrument he could get his hands on, "it was just something that I had to do, an outlet that I had to have." Even as he refers to this notion as "sort of faux profound and cliched"; it's the truth, and that's what Ben is about now. Just facing up to the task at hand, music has been "a real stable place for me to put my energy and thoughts throughout my entire life that I really wouldn't trade for anything." Having been in a band that's toured all over, swiftly becoming cult indie favourites, and garnering respect amongst fans and critics alike, this second chapter for Ben comes with the knowledge that once things get serious and you have to reevaluate what's what, you most importantly have to know "how to keep it something that you keep the magic in it."

At this point, it seems appropriate to ask the big question – does Ben miss being in a band at all? "I think about it all the time, like every day," he says before taking a brief pause. "And then I see a touring band, and I think I don't miss being in a band. I like being in the same place for a little while. I like making friends and relationships and having structure in my life.

"I'm glad that I got to do the not-having-any-structure to my life at a time when it's the best time to do it, you know? Isn't that your late teens and early 20s? When other people's formative experiences were at uni going a bit mad? I'm glad that I did that with those guys, turning 21 in Texas and stuff like that. Now I just like watching University Challenge." University Challenge? How many does he get right, then? "Max four, and then other episodes, it's as if they're speaking another language."

As for the rest of the Blaenavon chaps, Ben confirms everyone's "doing some really cool stuff." But the most important factor, for now, is this step forward. One which he once again affirms "has given me a really great sense of purpose." And that's what 'Episode" central idea is. Throughout his trials and tribulations, and by offering his own up as direction, Ben's foundations are finally ready to be built upon. ■ **Ben Gregory's album 'Episode' is out 7th April.**

PISODE



INCOMING.

ALL THE NEW RELEASES YOU NEED TO KNOW

WHAT DO THE SCORES MEAN? ★ Rubbish ★★ Not Great ★★★ Fair ★★★★ Good ★★★★★ Amazing





Black Honey
A Fistful of Peaches
★★★★

Released: Out now.

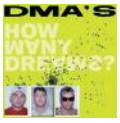
→ Few bands know more about creating worlds than Black Honey. Since the very beginning, their eye for grabbing at the spotlight and twisting it into their own glorious creation has made them more than just another very exciting band.
After storming the Official Albums Chart with 'Written & Directed', 'A Fistful Of Peaches' feels like a grandstand moment. Turning those widescreen ambitions inwards, it's Black Honey's greatest statement yet: an album that roars with ambition and defiance. Perfectly balancing the personal and the punchy, the stomping hooks of 'Charlie Bronson', 'Tombstone' and 'I'm A Man' are wrapped in a furious intensity, yet still pack that emotional kick you see soaring off the likes of 'Heavy', 'Out Of My Mind' and 'Up Against It'. Raw. Swaggering. Natural. This is Black Honey at their sharpest. **JAMIE MUIR**



Ben Gregory
Episode
★★★★

Released: 7th April 2023

→ Ben Gregory's debut is a heavy record. Not in the rock sense, but rather heavy with overwhelming emotion and deep reflection. Following upheaval from both illness and his much-loved band Blaenavon coming to an end, there's no way this record could be anything but emotionally heartbreaking. The overwhelming feeling, though, is one of triumph and reflection. Anyone with any love for Ben's music old or new will cherish the return of an artist facing the future with renewed hope. **MARTYN YOUNG**



DMA'S
How Many Dreams?
★★★★

Released: 31st March 2023

→ DMA's have never been the band you'd presume they were, but while on previous records they've soared beyond expectations, 'How Many Dreams?' is something else entirely. A record that flips switches and changes lanes at will, it's both familiar and fantastical. 'Olympia' jangles and sparkles with lofty ambitions and piercing guitar licks, while 'Everybody's Saying Thursday's The Weekend' is bright, bubbly pop. 'How Many Dreams?' isn't high art, but it is bags of fun. **DAN HARRISON**



JAWNY
It's Never Fair, Always True
★★★★

Out now

→ Everyone loves JAWNY. No seriously, everyone. Unless you're allergic to fun. In which case, what on earth are you doing here? It's been hotly anticipated but now the Californian bedroom-pop legend has arrived with his debut album, and it's a wonderfully fresh and vibrate explosion of personality from an artist who isn't afraid to delve deep into his sonic box of tricks and have the time of his life doing it. A colourful and dynamic debut from an artist fully realising his potential. **MARTYN YOUNG**



Mimi Webb
Amelia
★★★★

Out now

→ Real, megawatt stars are becoming rarer and rarer. The ones who don't shy away from infectious hooks and bubblegum glamour. Mimi Webb, however, has those old school qualities by the bucketload. On 'Amelia', her debut album, she embraces that larger-than-life, dramatic energy and emerges a pop star in her own right. Brimming with the kind of feel-good, get-over-him tracks you'd switch on to lift your best mate's spirits after a bad breakup, 'Amelia' is the sound of a talent in the making. **NEIVE MCCARTHY**



Kamal.
so here you are, drowning
★★★★

Released: 17th March 2023

→ Kamal.'s latest is perhaps the best example of the 19-year-old's pop talent. The vibe is still lo-fi alt-pop, but there's an added depth to his songwriting that means everything hits just that bit harder. 'so so close' is a heart-stopping acoustic stunner, while the vulnerability of nighttime lullaby 'crowded places' induces goosebumps. There's still room for a bop too, and Kamal. delivers and then some with the slinky warped pop of 'leave me alone'. Lovely stuff. **MARTYN YOUNG**



Blondshell
Blondshell
★★★★★

Released: 7th April 2023

→ Sometimes an album immediately signals the presence of a bonafide superstar. With Blondshell's debut, that arrival is welcomed in the boldest and warmest way possible, with a record that at one moment sounds like a lush wall of sound and at the next like catching up with a best mate. It's that confessional style which makes Blondshell so special: lighter moments are mixed with devastating ones. 'Blondshell' is the alternative arrival that 2023 has been waiting for. **JAMIE MUIR**

RECOMMENDED RELEASES.



Paramore
This Is Why
★★★★★

→ With genuine love, knowledge and appreciation of the influences they pull from, Paramore continue to read the zeitgeist before it truly hits. Both an evolution and a revolution true to who they are, that constant motion never fails to hit the spot.



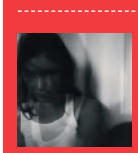
Shame
Food For Worms
★★★★★

→ Shame have come up with something special here. Proper lightning in a bottle stuff, its lack of polish and abrasive edges capture the energy and excitement from one of the country's best live bands.



Inhaler
Cuts & Bruises
★★★★

→ Some bands take a little while to find their feet, but it feels like Inhaler were instead born at a sprint and are still refusing to slow down. It's only been a minute since they smashed their way to a Number 1 album, and, wearing those cuts and bruises from the album title like badges of honour, album two sees them keep that momentum going and then some.



Gracie Abrams
Good Riddance
★★★★★

→ Gracie's debut is a stunner: a masterclass in evocative songwriting from an artist who has already established their own universe.



100 gecs
10,000 gecs
★★★

Released: 17th March 2023

→ 100 gecs' debut '1000 gecs' is one of the most divisive but influential albums in recent memory. The difficulty when you're heralded as figureheads of a scene in the form of the much-quoted hyperpop is, what comes next? It's a challenge that gecs are definitely up for, but succeed to mixed results on their long-awaited follow up, '10,000 gecs'. Fortunately, there's still enough here to say 100 gecs are a positive alt-pop force to be celebrated. **MARTYN YOUNG**



Nia Archives
Sunrise Bang Your Head Against The Wall EP
★★★★

Out now

→Jungle is, indeed, massive. From the first glimmer of the Barbatuques sampling 'Baianá', Nia Archives proves that very fact through the entirety of 'Sunrise Bang Ur Head Against Tha Wall', the Bradford-born producer's third project. It's a mammoth task of both revitalisation and homage that winds you up until you can finally exhale. Nia Archives is ready to continue in her voyage as the newly crowned queen of jungle. **NEIVE MCCARTHY**



Daughter
Stereo Mind Game
★★★★

Released: 7th April 2023

→ In a field of moody folk and hushed electronics, that's where we saw Daughter last back in 2017. Meeting them again now feels like no time has passed at all. Weaving their melodies as effortlessly as ever, they create a world of their own on 'Stereo Mind Game'. An exhilarating tale of connection and disconnection fading in and out of optimism, it allows the band to showcase the full spectrum of their sound palette. Some shades familiar, others new, but all of them transcendent. **LAURA FREYALDENHOVEN**

ARTIST'S GUIDE
SOFTCULT
SEE YOU IN THE DARK EP

Mercedes Arn-Horn talks us through Softcult's brand new EP, track by track.



DRAIN
We wrote 'Drain' about our frustrations with the inaction surrounding the climate crisis and the shameless greed of corporations and government officials that adds fuel to the fire. It makes me sick that there are people out there who prioritise monetary profits over sustaining our environment and saving lives. There have been so many performative shows of 'action', hollow displays of concern from billionaires and their companies, motivated by greed instead of offering any actual solutions to the crisis. It's gotten to the point where we've allowed billionaires to buy and monopolise social media and other information sources so they can change the narrative because it benefits them in the very short term. They would rather spend their money spreading dangerous misinformation and lies, politicising a global tragedy, instead of using it to solve this emergency. Billionaires don't give a shit about us or our quality of life. The world's wealthiest people could end world hunger in exchange for only 10% of their riches. But they are not being taxed for their rapacity. Whatever 'empire' they've 'built' with their prosperity and opulence won't matter in the end. Because of their greed and subsequent inaction, the only lasting legacy they will leave behind will be our extinction.

DRESS
'Dress' is about consent and victim blaming. There is absolutely no excuse or scenario that makes SA justifiable. It doesn't matter who you are... a cop, a dude in a band, a president... you need to obtain consent. There seems to be a lot of confusion around that, STILL, and it's time we all understood this very simple concept: No means NO.
To anyone out there who has ever experienced SA, we want you to know that you are not to blame, for any reason whatsoever. Why is such a large percentage of our society still pointing the finger at victims after they come forward?
We need to hold predators accountable and provide a safe space for survivors to share their stories.

ONE OF A MILLION
'One Of A Million' is sort of our thoughts about the importance of community, and how our combined experiences give us the power to relate to one another even coming from all different walks of life. It's also some revelations on the impact our actions have on one another, good and bad. I think it's important that we all realise we're more the same than different. Sometimes we need to try and see things from each other's perspectives instead to argue semantics.

SOMEONE2ME
'Someone2Me' is calling out incels and their toxic ideologies. Men who have an obsessive hatred towards women they feel entitled to need to understand how dangerous these views are. I think it's time we stopped accepting and ignoring unsafe behaviour and harmful rhetoric just because we're women and we're taught to endure it. Harassment is never okay. Abuse, physical, verbal, or emotional, is never okay. These horrific incel beliefs are insidious coping mechanisms for anger and frustration that are rooted in ignorance, and insecurity.
I think the if we call out misogyny and bigotry in all it's forms, make sure our friends are all informed and aware of this issue, then we can finally put an end to it so no one else has to suffer.

LOVE SONG
We wrote 'Love Song' is a song about love, obviously, but it's also about our ability to overthink and get in our own way when it comes to relationships.
Often times love and happiness can feel like these distant, unattainable things that are finite in nature.
It's easy to fixate on losing the people we love because they matter so much to us that we're terrified of what life would be without them.
But these anxious thoughts can get in the way of our ability to be truly vulnerable with our partners.
This song is a check-in to remind ourselves to enjoy the present moments with the people we love and not allow anxieties to sabotage our relationships.

SPOILED
'Spoiled' is a song about 'self-talk'. I think a lot of people can relate to the feeling of not being good enough or worthy, even if it's not justified.
We all have that inner voice that is constantly telling us we're broken. It's that inner voice that convinces us to push people away, to protect them and ourselves. But we can't allow that saboteur control us.
'Spoiled' is about battling our insecurities and traumas, and being grateful for the people who stay by our side and and give us a safe space to grow. ■

Softcult
See You In The Dark EP
★★★★★

Released 24th March 2023.

→ There's something about Softcult. A fuzzy, fantastical, stomach punch of grungy delight that feels tangible, latest EP 'See You In The Dark' is a delight. Full of hazy, dreamy hooks and heavy thoughts, at times the subject matters may be weighty ('Dress' and its closing cries in particular cuts deep), but it's delivered in such a way its impact is only heightened. Special stuff. **DAN HARRISON**



Fall Out Boy
So Much (For) Stardust
★★★★

Released: 24th March 2023

→ Don't call it a throwback, warned Patrick Stump after the release of rip-roaring lead single 'Love from the Other Side' heralded 'So Much (for) Stardust'. It felt like a 2007 wormhole had opened up. Is this the sound of Fall Out Boy slipping into the warm embrace of nostalgia, then? Far from it. By the time the bombastic title-track closes things out, they've achieved something remarkable; that after years of fans comparing their past to their future, the two eras feel reconciled. **DILLON EASTOE**



Tommy Lefroy
Rivals EP
★★★★

Out now

→ Following on from last year's debut EP 'Flight Risk', Tommy Lefroy's second EP 'Rivals' arrives in full force – armed for a fight where its predecessor was more inclined to hide in plain sight. Angular, heavily texturised opener 'Dog Eat Dog' is the most prominent manifestation of said fighting stance with its sharp edges and satirical commentary on the women-as-rivals theme. Confident, unapologetic, and heroic in its own right, this EP should be putting the duo on everyone's radar. **LAURA FREYALDENHOVEN**



Billie Marten
Drop Cherries
★★★★

Released: 7th April 2023

→ Billie Marten opens her fourth album with an intimate instrumental that sets the tone for what's to come. To a soundtrack of smouldering percussions and free-roaming melodies, she tells stories of love and longing, of forgiveness and the give-and-take that is the unspoken foundation of every relationship. Each song uncovers a different aspect of what it means to love and be loved, but what it all comes down to is showing up: "dropping cherries". **LAURA FREYALDENHOVEN**

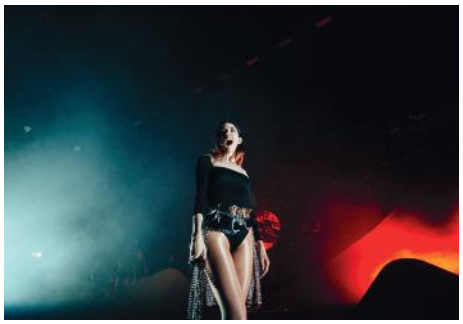
GET OUT.

LIVE MUSIC, FROM THE FRONT.



CAROLINE POLACHEK PROVES HERSELF AN UNLIKELY POP SUPERSTAR

Hammersmith Apollo
14th February 2023









Photos: **Patrick Gunning.**



→ CAROLINE POLACHEK IS ON A MISSION TO RECLAIM FEBRUARY 14TH AS HER OWN. Dropping her much anticipated second album, 'Desire, I Want To Turn Into You', on Valentine's Day 2023 and performing it that night at London's Eventim Apollo is the best gift any pop stan could ask for.

Tonight's show was meant to happen last Halloween and was pushed back so she could finish the album, but it feels infinitely more appropriate now. She plays up to the album's overarching themes of the joy of human connection by gathering her devotees in one place to celebrate love (and 'Desire...' of course).

Caroline is firmly situated in the unlikely pop superstar category, alongside Phoebe Bridgers, Mitski and the like, who garner screams akin to those heard at teen boy band concerts. So as the lights go down and a clock appears on the stage screen, counting down the two minutes until she starts wailing the opening notes of 'Welcome To My Island' off stage, the floor crowd may as well have been screeching it for her.

She's easily one of the best and most interesting vocalists working today – both her "haters will say it's autotune" yodelling playfulness and her classical opera training lending a hand – but to open a show with that note, AND keep it up for the entire hour and a half stage time, against the multiple smoke machines constantly fogging up her immediate surroundings, is some feat.

Playing 'Desire, I Want To Turn Into You' almost entirely in order, interjected by the odd 'Pang' track, by the time she gets to the record's first single 'Bunny Is A Rider' fourth, she's fully hit her stride. Its bouncy and carefree, making the transition into 'Crude Drawing of an Angel' all the more contrasting. It's a dark show as it is, Caroline often only lit by a single spotlight and backed by the changing landscape projected behind her and the giant volcano she shares the stage with, but on this one, she's lit by footage of burning crosses in an Ethel Cain-ish religious nod to the track's themes. An eerie moment that almost immediately lifts as she goes into a run of 'Ocean of Tears', 'I Believe' and 'Fly To You'.

Assumedly trying to cram as many 'Pang' songs in as possible (and in the absence of her two guests Grimes and Dido here), 'Look At Me Now' is incorporated into 'Fly To You' in place of Dido's verse, a complete transformation from the acoustic way she usually plays it. There is a guest for 'Blood and Butter', though: the bagpipe player Bríghde Chaimbeul, who Caroline says she discovered last summer and wanted to play on the album. She gets an extended bagpipe solo tonight as Caroline does her usual arm-flinging and twirling beside her on stage.

Leaning heavily into the Valentine's vibes, she mimics plucking chocolates from the air, as if picking fruit from a tree, to the opening beat of billions, before throwing actual chocolates into the crowd as the track starts. While it's not her final track, the entire theatre singing "I never felt so close to you" is a very special moment.

She dips off stage after the now-TikTok-famous 'So Hot You're Hurting My Feelings – the whole crowd now able to recite its accompanying dance – for a costume change. Before performing 'Door', she gives a tearful speech about how we're all full of potential, and sometimes reaching it just takes meeting the right person. She's talking about Danny L Harle, the PC Music producer who's worked with her on both solo albums (and who's currently in the crowd with Dua Lipa, who Caroline toured with on her major 'Future Nostalgia' tour last year) and with such has helped propel her into real stardom.

'Smoke', one of the earliest songs Caroline recorded for this album comes last. It's a song about catharsis that actually, after spending so long in her Google Drive, feels like a literal release. As the confetti cannons go off and the stage volcano smokes, the song, only really a day old, only simmers. Give it a few months and it'll blow up, though, much like we can expect Caroline to, finally. **ABIGAIL FIRTH**

REBECCA BLACK IS GETTING DOWN ON FRIDAY









→ REBECCA BLACK IS MAKING A STATEMENT. Scheduling her biggest headline show ever on a Friday – and specifically one that comes a day after the release of her debut album 'Let Her Burn', which also happened to drop exactly twelve years after her debut single, the widely mocked and memed 'Friday' – isn't a coincidence. If anything, it's a pop redemption arc for the ages.

The mainstream-flop-to-gay-icon pipeline is a strong one, though those who paved the way did not suffer the way Rebecca did. It wasn't until she remixed the viral track that made her a global laughing stock at age 13, that she was able to truly reclaim her narrative, going full hyperpop with a Dylan Brady-aided rebrand. Except this time, a whole decade later, the virality wouldn't die.

So tonight, at London's Heaven – a fitting venue choice considering the community that have wholeheartedly embraced Rebecca – she absolutely packs it out. The album she's about to perform in full has only been out for a day, but it doesn't really matter. There's a sense from Rebecca's various speeches between songs that she never thought this day would come, but from the way she performs, it also feels like she's been preparing for it the entire time.

Kicking off with 'What Am I Gonna Do With You?', she unleashes a stage presence that's rarely been given the chance to see the light of day. Effortlessly weaving between the Eilish-lite whisper of 'Crumbs', the belting pre-chorus of 'Misery Loves Company', and the high notes of ballad 'Sick To My Stomach', she shows she's actually got vocal chops as well.

Rebecca Black has spent much of her career trying to prove she's a serious pop star. Consistently releasing music throughout the years between being a meme and being a hyperpop icon, she proclaims that her sold out show tonight of over 1,600 is "not bad for a girl who couldn't sell eight tickets to a show six years ago". And she's right, very few would've expected this trajectory, but her perseverance is admirable.

The set also pulls heavily from 2021's 'Rebecca Black Was Here', the EP that doubled down on the success of the 'Friday' remix, creating highlights like the crowd-led 'NGL' and scathing breakup bop 'Personal'. A cover of Vanessa Carlton's 'A Thousand Miles' comes mid-way through (covering a song that has also long been thought of as a guilty pleasure feels quite deliberate), and before dipping into 'Worth It For The Feeling', Rebecca thanks those who'd listened to her music and taken her seriously before anyone else ever did.

After a couple of ballads, she returns to the stage for an encore, which is of course the famed 'Friday' remix. Screaming the lyrics into a warbling autotuned mic, flinging her sunglasses off and making her way into the pit, it's a nostalgic banger that'll live on long past the hyperpop craze. She's not even done yet. Finishing on an amped-up version of the euphoric 'Girlfriend', Rebecca Black has never been more celebrated, and it's a joy to see. Rebecca Black was here and she was incredible. Let her burn, she's already on fire. **ABIGAIL FIRTH**

Heaven, London
10th February 2023

Photos: **Patrick Gunning.**





YUNGBLUD CONTINUES THE CHAOS



Photos: **Frances Beach.**

→ YUNGBLUD EXPLODED ONTO THE SCENE WITH HIS SELF-TITLED EP IN 2018 AND HASN'T STOPPED BLOWING UP SINCE. Over the course of three studio albums ('21st Century Liability', 'Weird' and 'Yungblud'), Dom Harrison has thrown off that scrappy punk sound and confidently dabbled in everything from brit-pop to grunge and electronica.

Live though, his shows have stayed safely within the realms of chaotic energy. From Camden's Electric Ballroom to Reading Festival's Main Stage, Yungblud has always relied on vibrant carnage while trying to make the biggest of stages feel more like the basement venues he grew up on. It's always worked as well with Yungblud's lust for a good time, annoyingly infectious.

Speaking to Dork last year, though, Dom revealed "the age of the new kid on the block is over," suggesting he wanted more for Yungblud. Taking to London's Wembley Arena on Saturday night, he unveils an ambitious new attitude to playing live.

Starting the show behind a big, white sheet with his silhouette twisted into a devil, Yungblud opens with a rampant '21st Century Liability' before celebratory emo anthem 'The Funeral' unites the room. The hits keep coming as well, with poppier moments like 'Tissues' and 'Strawberry Lipstick' causing just as much anarchy as the snarling 'Die For The Hype' and 'Medication', which sees Yungblud spinning around on a b-stage as flames erupt from behind him. So far, it's everything you'd expect from a Yungblud show.

However, things soon take a turn. Sitting on a toilet, Yungblud lights a cigarette and pretends to read the book 'El And The Mirror' while a voiceover tells the tale of self-acceptance and community out loud. "They realised they were no longer alone, and neither are you." It then starts raining before the disco punk dance of 'Sex Not Violence' kicks in.

Following that dramatic moment of encouragement, the storytelling bombast of 'Mars' and the glitching electro hammer of 'I Cry 2' are allowed space to be as brilliantly weird as possible, with Yungblud not trying to hide their theatrics behind a coat of scrappy punk rock. Likewise, the twinkling 'Sweet Heroine' is confidently gooey and soft. It's not as in-your-face as usual, but the show is much better for taking a few new risks.

A final five-song flourish sees Yungblud once again turn Wembley Arena into a swirling mass of snarling self-expression with the soaring 'Hope For The Underrated Youth', the urgent 'The Boy In The Black Dress' and 'Loner' 's rock and roll swagger letting Yungblud stake his claim once more as a guitar hero for a new generation.

Yungblud's never been one for doing the expected, and while this dream-come-true show at Wembley Arena may be the biggest headline gig he's ever played, it feels like the start of something new for the star. Where he goes next is anyone's guess, but the door is very much open.



OVO Arena Wembley, London
25th February 2023

ATEEZ DELIVER AS THEY TAKE OVER LONDON'S O2 ARENA

The O2, London
22nd February 2023

Photos: **Patrick Gunning.**



→ IF YOU WANDER INTO K-POP STAN TERRITORY ON TWITTER, YOU'LL LIKELY FIND A DEBATE ABOUT WHO THE LEADERS OF THE PHENOMENON'S 4TH GENERATION ARE. Tonight ATEEZ plead their case as they take over London's massive O2 arena, becoming the first of their generation to play here, and only the fourth group to do so overall.

In the company of some of K-Pop's biggest players, the other three groups to play the 20,000-capacity venue are the no-introductions-necessary BTS, SM Entertainment's boy-group-best-of SuperM, and most recently, the biggest girl group in the world, Blackpink. These are undoubtedly big shoes to fill.

Not that this phases the ATEEZ boys, they deliver and then some. It's their third time in the capital, rising rapidly after playing Kentish Town Forum in 2019, and Wembley Arena last year, a rescheduled show that was originally planned for 2020. You'd imagine their ascent would've been even faster if it wasn't interrupted by the pandemic.

So the house lights go down, thousands of Atiny (that's their fandom name, FYI) light sticks make the arena glow instead, and there's some serious decibels when the boys walk on stage. They make their way down the runway and drop their black cloaks, kicking off with 'New World', the rumbling closer track from the EP they're touring (that's 'THE WORLD EP1: MOVEMENT' BTW). Featuring the chorus lyric "Can't you feel the storm? Can't you see me now?", it's a statement only amplified by the fact there's confetti cannons opening the show with them.

The show is loosely split into four acts across its almost three hour run time (yes, blimey), divided by costume changes and VTs consisting of moody shots of the group that garner almost as many screams as when they're actually on stage. Following a bombastic opening section that ends with early hit 'HALA HALA' – a track with such razor sharp choreography, the shots of ATEEZ performing it in real time are spliced with the music video – they get the ballad section out of the way early.

After all, this performance is clearly a marathon not a sprint, so the trio of slower tempo numbers 'Dazzling Light', 'Mist' and 'Sunrise' feels like merely the calm before the storm. ATEEZ's versatility is never to be underestimated either. After standing behind the mics in white deconstructed suits for the belting section, they bounce into a pair of summer bangers, 'Illusion' and 'Wave', slinging beach balls into the audience.

All of this is just teasing though, the best is still yet to come. The boys return to the stage for act three, clad in what looks like latex combat gear. It's in this run that their signature sound really thrives. Aggressive electronic beats, pounding marching band drums, snarling verses from the pair of rappers Hongjoong and Mingi, incredible belting vocals from youngest member Jongho which cut through it all. These hits – 2021's 'I'm The One' and 'ROCKY', plus debut album lead single 'WONDERLAND' – belong on huge stages like this one.

ATEEZ actually getting to perform at a venue as big as this is a feat in itself – a real win for the underdogs of K-Pop. Coming from a far smaller company than their immediate competitors (i.e. not one of the 'big four' with a huge legacy behind it), they've always worked like they had something to fight for, and the payoff is immense.

It's hard not to be impressed by the sheer stamina involved in a production like this, the ferocious dancing and moving between the big stage and a smaller one at the end of a runway is knackering alone, but to it all while performing is another thing (any doubts as to whether or not they're singing live are waived when member San's head mic fails during 'Illusion' and he's passed a second one to continue performing).

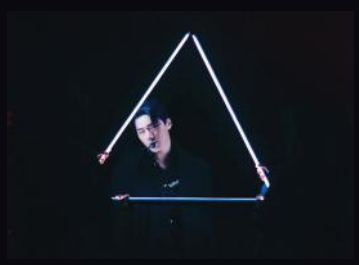
As with most K-Pop groups, consistent fan devotion has likely carried ATEEZ to the top, but here, it's easy to see what they're praying at the altar of. The appreciation is mutual too, the group thanking the fans for their support at every opportunity, the fans screaming "I LOVE YOU" every time a member lifts their mic to talk (they also sometimes literally bark). When the show closes pre-encore with 'Guerrilla', a career highlight level track that the tour's 'Break The Wall' concept is based on, the screams from the crowd as they join in with that lyric are deafening.

Regardless of who the leaders of the fourth generation actually are, one thing is for sure: if the rest of the groups are of the same calibre as ATEEZ, the industry is in very safe hands.

ABIGAIL FIRTH







EASY LIFE'S BIGGEST SHOW TO DATE IS ONE TO REMEMBER

Alexandra Palace, London
15th February 2023



Photos: Patrick Gunning.







→ HALFWAY THROUGH EASY LIFE'S HEADLINE PARTY AT LONDON'S ALEXANDRA PALACE, A PHONE GOES OFF. It stops the show, and rings bounce around the venue as Murray picks up to see who it is. It's an invite to an afters, and let's just say he's busy. "Nah mate, I can't; I'm on stage at Ally Pally right now," he replies. Moments later, there's another ring, asking if that is indeed true. Next, they're buzzed in, and Easy Life's triumphant night continues. It captures the feeling that runs through every moment of this Saturday night in London for a band who've captured a modern generation like few others.

Through a mesmerising blend of hip-hop, electronica, indie and much more, Easy Life have grown into a band whose every step feels more considerable than the one that came before. Tonight may be the biggest headline show they've ever played, but judging by how they command the vast hall in front of them, this is the natural home they've always been ready to fill. It's a palpable celebration of a band who've done things their way, a shining statement of originality and passion.

From the first drop of 'GROWING PAINS', Easy Life embrace that feeling of a big-time show but voiced through their own speakerphone. Decked in uniform leather jackets and a dazzling production to boot, frontman Murray is a ball of energy. The lush vigour of 'daydreams' and the singalong refrain of 'sangria' set a joyous mood; few shows come close to the sheer fun and happiness that Easy Life bring. It's dialled up to ridiculous levels, whether it's the sweeping pop gleams of 'OTT' (which sees a fan join the band to play guitar in its spinning outro), the pounding electro breakdowns of 'BASEMENT' (which live, becomes an unstoppable wave of scorching beats and the throwdowns) or the drowned out calls of early number 'slow motion'.

Slick and euphoric, it's enough proof to point to Easy Life as one of the best live experiences you'll find right now. The deep record collection that's inspired their turns and points are played out in the boldest fashion here – 'ojpl', 'frank' and 'ocean view' laying out a journey infused with eclectic directions, while 'skeletons' turns Ally Pally into a pogoing mass of release. As Murray crowdsurfs during 'nightmares', there's the feeling of a band grasping that big stage and running with it.

Yet with all the technicolour brilliance of the show put on in front of them, it's at its emotional core that Easy Life take on a new meaning. Taking time out of the set, Murray explains how they started playing in pubs and clubs across Leicester and "to be here tonight playing in front of all of you is the greatest achievement of them all. I'm holding back tears right now." It's right at the surface when they crack into latest album favourite 'trust exercises', the room lighting up. What Easy Life have managed to do over the past five or so years is distil what it's like growing up in an age overloaded with news, where information comes thick and fast. The combination of that, alongside a riotous live spectacle, may just be the greatest thing about this band.

That's never clearer when stepping out for their encore; Sam from the band explains emotionally how he recently lost a close friend to suicide and implores everyone to look after one another and talk, before breaking into an emotional 'FORTUNE COOKIE'. It's a powerful moment that dials back to the heart of what Easy Life represents – that with everything, that human connection to look out for those around you and to dance together in the face of it all may just be the most important lesson of them all.

It cements Easy Life's biggest headline show at Ally Pally as one to remember. Massive hits, a guest appearance from one Gus Dapperton and a blistering finale including 'BEESWAX', the track that started it all in 'pockets' and the swinging 'DEAR MISS HOLLOWAY' – the confetti that falls capture a landmark moment for a band firmly leading a new generation in style. As Murray notes: "Saturday Night. Ally Pally. This is the craziest shit that has ever happened to this band." **JAMIE MUIR**

ANY OTHER QUESTIONS? WITH... PIRI

Yes, Dear Reader. We enjoy those 'in depth' interviews as much as anyone else. But - BUT - we also enjoy the lighter side of music, too. We simply cannot go on any longer without knowing that **piri** likes - erm - rice and... gravy?



You're picking a 5-item breakfast. What's in it?
French toast, maple syrup, bananas, strawberries, hash browns.

What did you last dream about?
Being late for a session.

When's your birthday?
14th March (pi day!!).

What is your earliest memory?
Dad blasting Fleetwood Mac on the drive to Wales to go camping.

If you could win a lifetime supply of anything, what would you choose?
Nandos!

What is your favourite time of day?
Evening.

If you could learn one skill instantly, without needing to practice, what would you pick?
Middle splits.

Do you believe in aliens?
Yes, but we'll never encounter them.

What was the first record you bought?
Dad got me Selena Gomez, naturally.

What strength Nandos sauce do you order?
Plain on burger or medium on wings.

Have you ever been thrown out of somewhere?
No, I'm a goody-two-shoes.

What is the strangest food combination you enjoy?
Rice and gravy lol.

If you had to be on a TV gameshow, which would you choose?
Catchphrase!

What's your biggest fear?
Catching on fire.

What's the furthest you've travelled to attend someone else's gig?
From London to Manny.

Have you ever fallen for a scam?
No!

Have you ever had a crush on a fictional character?
Yes, many anime men.

What's the pettiest thing you've ever done?
Nothing, I'm a pushover.

Which supermarket do you shop at?
ASDA! The best!!

How many hats do you own?
Only my frog hat.

What is your most treasured possession?
My laptop (where the beats are).

What do you always have in your refrigerator?
Whole milk and oat milk.

If you had a pet elephant, what would you call it?
Nelly??

What's the most embarrassing thing that's ever happened to you?
When I tried to make trap (it was awful).

Is there anything you're brilliant at, but nobody else knows?
Pole dancing!

If you could read the mind of one person, who would it be?
Tommy Villiers lol.

What was the last thing you broke?
My hair clip.

If we gave you £10, what would you spend it on?
Probably Nandos.

Have you ever seen a ghost?
Nope.

How punk are you out of ten?
1/10.

How long can you hold a grudge?
It depends what kind of grudge.

Why are you like this?
Cos baby I was born this way.

piri & Tommy Villiers' single 'updown' is out now.

Dork, CloseUp & The 100 Club presents:



DORK

CLOSE UP

100 CLUB

DICE

BLACK HONEY

A FISTFUL OF PEACHES

THE NEW ALBUM - MARCH 17th



studio NOISE

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