** PLUS ** SELF ESTEEM GHOST SAMIA SUNFLOWER BEAN SCOWL PRIMA QUEEN MODEL/ACTRIZ LYDIA NIGHT + LOADS MORE

DORK

DOWN WITH BORING

ISSUE 98 · MAY 2025 · READDORK.COM



Japanese Breakfast

Melancholy and the infinite sadness

9 - 12 JULY 2025

TREES

CHELTENHAM

THURSDAY

KNEECAP

Puris!

BIG SPECIAL

KID KAPICHI

STICK TO YOUR GUNS

BABY LASAGNA

D2 DEATHRAYS

SNAYX

LAKE MALICE

GRADE 2

CIVIC

DEATHBYROMY

HYPHEN

BATTLESNAKE • MERYL STREEK • GOOD HEALTH GOOD WEALTH • OVERSIZE • YOUTH KILLED IT • SPACED • JESSE BARNETT • GRIEF RITUAL
TAYNE • CHROMA • PAVÉ • QUEEN CULT • SAN DEMAS • TERMINALS

FRIDAY

TAKING BACK SUNDAY

COHEED AND CAMBRIA

Million Dead

FIDLAR

THE DANGEROUS SUMMER

BOMBAY BICYCLE CLUB

Hero!

DELTA SLEEP

GRAPHIC NATURE

unpeople

WITCH FEVER

JULIA WOLF

VENUS GRRRLS • BENEFITS • HAIL THE SUN • COILGUNS • KEG • JOOLS • DIE SPITZ • YOUTH FOUNTAIN • ORCHARDS • TERMINAL SLEEP
KAONASHI • CLOBBER • SPYRES • THANK • COUGHIN' VICARS • SPLIT DOGS • FAILSTATE • EVER

SATURDAY

ALEXISONFIRE

letlive.

RORY

VUKOVI

SPRINTS

Incendiary

LA DISPUTE

AS DECEMBER FALLS

GEL

FUTURE OF THE LEFT

anxious

EMPLOYED TO SERVE

THE HARA

VOWER

BIRDS IN ROW

black foxxes

LOWLIVES • GIRLBAND! • CATBITE • CHASTITY • HUMOUR • OUT OF LOVE • PEST CONTROL • EYES • DAYTIME TV • LAST HOUNDS • HIDDEN MOTHERS
RONKER • BRUISE CONTROL • BAD SIGN • TARMAC • LOVE RARELY • HUNNY BUZZ • CYAN KICKS • FREDDIE HALKON • BEN BROWN

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THE MEFFS

BLOOD COMMAND

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VOWER

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Meryl Streek

OTHER HALF • BUDS. • BLANK ATLAS

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Marshall NATAL ARBOR WESTONS MELIORA SOFTWARE EYESORE MERCH STAYSTAINLESS METAL FOR GOOD

INDEX

ISSUE 98 | MAY 2025 | READDORK.COM | DOWN WITH BORING

DORK
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TOP TEN.

4. TUNDE ADEBIMPE
6. WISHY
7. MOMMA

JUICE.

8. LYDIA NIGHT
10. EMPLOYED TO SERVE
12. PUP
14. A DAY IN THE LIFE OF... ALIEN CHICKS
14. WITCH POST'S TEENAGE KICKS

HYPE.

16. SAM AKPRO
17. CLUTTER
18. Y
19. JENSEN MCRAE
20. LÉA SEN
22. KAYLA GRACE
23. PUNCHBAG
24. ERIN LECOUNT

FEATURES.

26. SELF ESTEEM
34. GHOST
40. JAPANESE BREAKFAST
48. SAMIA
50. SCOWL
52. PRIMA QUEEN
54. SUNFLOWER BEAN
56. MODEL/ACTRIZ

INCOMING.

54. SELF ESTEEM
55. BLONDSHELL
56. VIAGRA BOYS
57. LUCY DACUS
58. THE DRIVER ERA
59. JULIEN BAKER & TORRES

GET OUT.

60. GRACIE ABRAMS
60. PICTURE PARLOUR
60. TOMORROW X TOGETHER
61. CHLOE SLATER
61. CLAIRO
62. NIGHTBUS

BACKPAGE.

62. ANY OTHER QUESTIONS WITH... TOTAL TOMMY







HELLO, DEAR READER!

May is a good month - two bank holidays, more than occasional sunny days, and the first glimmers of festival season - and we've got a new issue to match.

First up, Self Esteem might have become one of Britain's most forthright pop powerhouses over the last few years, but she's not about to start playing it safe now – with a brand new album and a take-no-prisoners attitude, she's become an absolute icon already. Meanwhile, Japanese Breakfast's Michelle Zauner has returned from memoir-writing and soundtrack-scoring to her primary love: indie-pop that aches and shimmers in equal measure. Fresh off the release of her latest record, she talks to us about embracing melancholy and momentum as her star continues to rise. And last but certainly not least, we have Ghost – the mysterious arena-conquering ghouls turning heavy metal into high art (and a bit of high camp). With a bombastic new album, we get a peek behind the mask at how they're keeping rock interesting in 2025.

Elsewhere in the magazine, the excitement continues at full throttle. On the heavier end of the spectrum, Scowl and Employed To Serve are doing their part to wake the neighbours – the former leading a ferocious hardcore punk charge out of California, the latter flying the flag for UK metal with a brand-new batch of face-melters. Not to be outdone, Canada's finest punk mischief-makers PUP are back, mixing caustic angst and dark humour into shout-along anthems that prove you can evolve without losing your bite. And just when you think you've got it all figured out, along come Model/Actriz to throw you for a loop – their frenetic, genre-defying noise-dance chaos is as thrilling as it is disorienting.

Of course, it's not all fury and fuzz. If you're craving melody, introspection, and a touch of glamour, we've got you covered. Samia turns twenty-something angst into cathartic indie-pop ballads that hit right in the feels, while Sunflower Bean continue to refine their glossy New York rock swagger without sacrificing an ounce of grit. Transatlantic duo Prima Queen have finally delivered their long-awaited debut album, packed with sharp, heart-on-sleeve storytelling wrapped in woozy guitar-pop – trust us, it's been worth the wait. And Momma, fresh off their new release, channel the spirit of 90s alt-rock into something fun, fierce, and entirely their own, ensuring the hooks and riffs keep coming.

We've also got some one-of-a-kind voices sharing their stories. Tunde Adebimpe – yes, that would be the frontman of TV On The Radio – has weathered a whirlwind of late and emerged with a solo project that might be his most adventurous work yet. He chats to us about turning turmoil into creativity, and why after all these years he's still finding new ways to push boundaries. Meanwhile, Lydia Night, formerly the fearless leader of The Regrettes, opens up about launching her solo era and coming of age in the public eye. She's got new music, a new perspective, and zero interest in playing by anyone else's rules, thank you very much. Two very different artists, both reminding us that evolution in music is alive and well.

Naturally, discovering new talent is our bread and maple syrup flavoured butter, and this month's Hype section is bursting at the seams with acts you'll want to brag about discovering first. Meet Sam Akpro, a South London alchemist fusing post-punk, jazz, and dub into a sound entirely his own. Over in Los Angeles, Jensen McRae pairs folk-pop melodies with razor-sharp lyricism – and a knack for striking an online nerve when you least expect it. Newcomers Punchbag come out swinging with raw, no-frills punk energy, while Léa Sen offers a more mellow counterpoint, crafting late-night R&B-inflected alt-pop that draws you in quietly. Also on our radar: Erin LeCount, who's graduated from Essex pub gigs (and a brush with reality TV fame) to belting out soulful rock tunes built for much bigger stages, and Kayla Grace, channelling Gen Z anxieties into wickedly catchy songs that refuse to leave your head. And just to keep things interesting, Clutter prove that noise-rock and experimental electronica are far from spent forces – they're making beautiful chaos that has to be heard to be believed. Exactly as we like it, then.

Until next time,

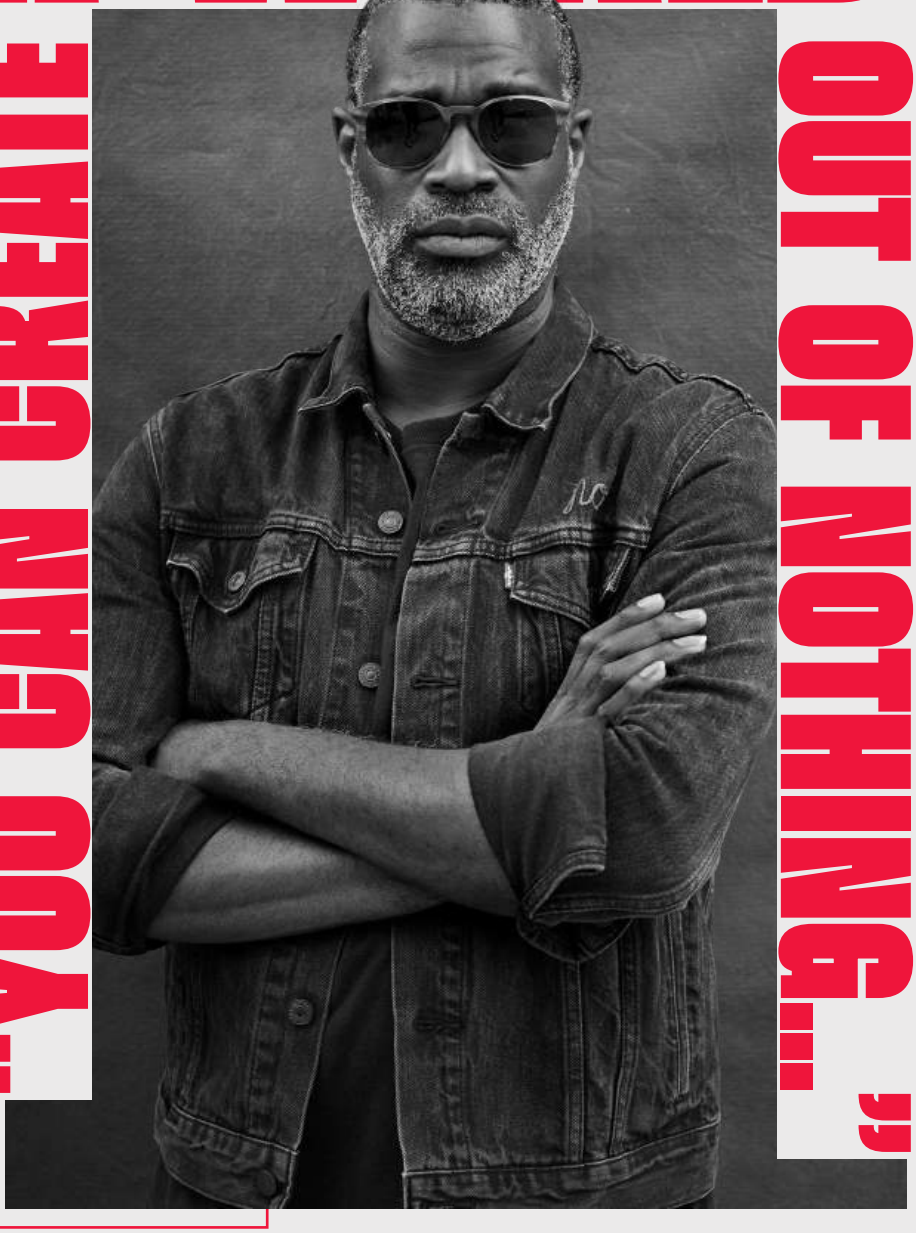
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TOP TEN

THE "BEES" "KNEES", THE "CAT'S" "PYJAMAS", THE "DOG'S" <SNIIIIIIIIIP! - ED> - IT'S THE TIP-TOP TOP 10!

"YOU CAN CREATE A WORLD OUT OF NOTHING..."



WORDS: JACK PRESS.

FROM GARAGE-ROCK TO COUNTRY CROSSOVERS, TV ON THE RADIO'S TUNDE ADEBIMPE CHANNELS MIXTAPE ENERGY INTO HIS MOST ADVENTUROUS WORK YET.

→ An old wives' tale says that bad things come in threes. For TV On The Radio's Tunde Adebimpe, it's no superstition: it's real life. In 2019, as the global pandemic threatened to take his livelihood away, his band pressed pause after 18 years together, he suffered the loss of several loved ones, and 15 years' worth of music was stolen from his garage.

Armed with nothing but a 4-track recorder, a box of tapes tracing his musical thoughts from 1997 to 2008, and his experiences of grief, Tunde slowly fed the starter that would become his first audible sourdough: a solo record.

"Music is something that's in your body, it's in your lungs and your mind, and it keeps you focused on something," says Adebimpe, pencil in hand and a grin on his face from his Brooklyn home. "Writing the demos was a way to be like ok, I'm just going to make more music, and all of these factors, these human events, are going to affect this thing."

Grief has many guises. It might wash up on the shore of your soul, slowly settling in. Or wave after wave crashes against you, breaking you down. And if you're Adebimpe, it's a destructive tsunami - he just didn't forget his swimsuit.

"There was that loss of this vessel for music that I had become very familiar with; there was my stuff getting taken, like all these notes I'd taken for the past 15 years," sighs Adebimpe, a rare break from his wide-eyed grin, before the hope returns. "If you're human, you're probably going to experience some kind of big loss in your life; it's just what we do, but I feel very grateful I have the ability to sit somewhere and create a world out of nothing."

Less a world, more a galaxy, 'Thee Black Boltz' takes listeners on a cosmic trip through Adebimpe's mixtape of influences. A single listen sees you planet-hopping from 'Magnetic"s bluesy, breakneck garage-rock to 'Ate The Moon"s psychedelic funk, to the rustic, rootsy Americana of 'ILY' and 'God Knows' and onwards through 'Blue"s trip-hop and 'Somebody New"s 80s synth-pop.

Inspired by mixtapes his friends would make him as a teenager, Adebimpe characterises 'Thee Black Boltz' as "a bunch of different cities in the same stretch of land, they're just different spots to stop by." Maybe for listeners, that's true, but for Adebimpe, they're the sparks of inspiration that powered him out of rock bottom like Batman escaping Bane's pit.

"I think it's odd when people say I hit rock bottom, because maybe the feeling was of hitting rock bottom, but in the moment I have enough of a support system that I can sit in my rock bottom and write music," Adebimpe reflects, chuckling to himself as he reveals the origins of his album's title. "It's not like I'm in a field, oh shit, I don't know what's gonna happen next, but maybe it's like this rock is actually a piece of flint that sparks an emotion, and these dark storm clouds that yield a bolt of lightning that illuminates this

"'FUCK OFF' CAN LAUNCH 1000 SHIPS"

TUNDE ADEBIMPE

heavy darkness."

The walking embodiment of 'when life gives you lemons, make lemonade', it's difficult to deny the positivity that pours out of Adebimpe. If TV On The Radio's hiatus was a planned pause, the pandemic was the emergency break that forced him to have a much-needed conversation with himself.

"I feel like sometimes stuff happens to you, and you're like, yeah, that's just regular, that affects everyone, and then you sit and think about it, and you're like, oh no, that sucked," explains Adebimpe. "A lot of it's about grief, where you can experience a really heavy grief, but you wouldn't experience that if you had not had the opportunity to really love these people in situations. For me, it was a gratitude for those moments of inspiration."

Once he'd bottled up those bolts of inspiration, he delivered them to multi-instrumentalist and long-time Run The Jewels collaborator Wilder Zoby and TV On The Radio's touring drummer Jahphet Landis. That's when Adebimpe's sketches of 'Thee Black Boltz' became sculptures.

"After the grand exodus of all this stuff I'd had for 15 years made its way out, bringing it to Wilder or Jahphet and having this conversation, like 'I wanna see what you guys do with this, and I'm not really going to talk too much about where they came from, but I just want you to get whatever feeling you're going to get from that'," says Adebimpe, painting a picture of the album's creation, and its impact on him. "Just the activity of sharing this stuff with your friends and having them contribute back to it totally pulled me out of that space."

Making the most of our limited time on this planet is a running theme for Adebimpe. It's also incredibly apt. Since 2019, Adebimpe's not only made a solo record, he's made himself at home in Hollywood's biggest franchises as an actor, and brought back TV On The Radio. For someone who's not taken a beat, it's funny it all started through wanting to.

"[TV On The Radio] didn't break up, but we needed a break, we needed a reset," smiles Adebimpe. "If I'm going to keep doing this in this structure with my friends, we gotta like each other again. And we do, but it requires us to go, 'Oh, we gotta go chill out for a second'."

Having taken advice from an artist friend when he first moved to New York to just do everything as no one knows how long they're here for, Adebimpe is always buzzing from project to project like a bee does flowers. Only, it's not always worked out for the best.

"Over the years, my brain will turn off in a certain direction, because I've been in situations where it's like, you need to go to sleep, and the reason you haven't been sleeping is because you did not plan, and this is your fault, three things are due, and you're not going to do it. It's not going to happen."

However, as 'Thee Black Boltz' arrives and TV On The Radio ramp their touring schedule back up, he's got a better system. "Now I've got a bit of a grid and really awesome people, too. My and TV On The Radio's manager is sort of like, 'Don't fuck up and do two things'. Do this one thing, and someone else could maybe handle that a little bit while you're doing the bulk of that."

Adebimpe's endless creativity is exactly what he hopes listeners take for themselves from 'Thee Black Boltz'. As if feeding off it like a power source, it's all about embracing life and making the most of it in whatever way, shape or form you want to.

"I hope that people find a place for themselves in it and sit where they want to sit. I hope you can write to it, I hope you can paint and draw to it, and I hope you can stare at a blank wall to it. I hope you can sit by the ocean to it. I hope you can blast it loud and dance around in your room or grab a group of friends and dance around."

"I hope that people feel exhilarated to do the things they wanna do, and I hope if you're in need of comfort by way of a shared experience of sadness, I hope there's that in there for you. If you feel completely fucked up and weird in the world and need someone to mirror that, you can find that on the record." ■ **Tunde Adebimpe's album 'Thee Black Boltz' is out 18th April.**

2 MOIST ANTICIPATED



→ If Wet Leg's new single 'Catch These Fists' suggests anything, it's that the Isle of Wight duo haven't lost their taste for sardonic provocation. Following up a breakthrough debut was always going to be tricky, but they've met the challenge head-on, if somewhat literally, delivering a track that sounds like an indie disco scrap waiting to happen. It's punchy, irreverent, and just a touch more aggressive than we're used to.

On their forthcoming album 'Moisturizer', Wet Leg lean even further into the knowing wit and wry detachment that made them stars. Recorded in the damp isolation of Southwold, the record promises songs about obsession and thwarted affection, all carried along by riffs that are equal parts catchy and confrontational.

If the rest of 'Moisturizer' matches the energy and tongue-in-cheek menace of 'Catch These Fists', Wet Leg's second act could be even more satisfying - and slightly more bruising - than the first.

3 BEST NEW MUSIC



→ Bands like Florence Road don't come along often, so when they do, it pays to sit up and pay attention. Arriving from Ireland with their debut single 'Heavy', the quartet - childhood mates Lily Aron, Emma Brandon, Ailbhe Barry, and Hannah Kelly - have shot out of the tracks with a bang. A touch of Wolf Alice, a bit of Phoebe Bridgers and more than a squeeze of Cranberries - they've a heady cocktail that feels as fresh as it is exciting.



What's striking about 'Heavy' isn't just how good it sounds, but how natural it feels. Florence Road aren't trying too hard to impress; they're confident enough to let the music speak for itself. There's genuine emotional depth here, matched by guitars that crunch and shimmer in just the right measures. It's indie rock that's smart without being self-conscious, immediate but never obvious.

The group's DIY roots - perfected in Aron's garden shed - give them an easy charm, grounding their ambition in authenticity. If they can keep the balance between raw feeling and catchy tunes that they've shown with 'Heavy', Florence Road could very well become your new favourite band.

PULP COME ALIVE

→ Pulp are back!-back!!-and-indeed-BACK!!! And properly, this time. After a 24-year absence, Sheffield's favourite raconteurs return with their new album 'More', due out on 6 June 2025 via Rough Trade. Leading the charge is the single 'Spike Island', in which Jarvis Cocker revisits the infamous Stone Roses concert with his usual mix of wit and weary irony. It's both nostalgic and critical, poking gentle fun at the myth-making around music's past glories.

Recorded briskly over three weeks at London's Orbb Studio, 'More' features contributions from long-time associates Richard Hawley and Jason Buckle, alongside backing vocals from the Eno family. The album also carries emotional resonance, dedicated to the band's late bassist Steve Mackey.

If 'Spike Island' sets the tone, expect an album that blends sharp commentary on ageing and pop culture with the classic, knowing humour that made Pulp essential in the first place.



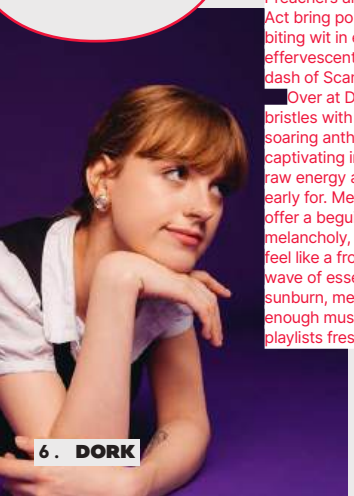
5 SEASIDE GLAMOUR

→ Brighton's Great Escape returns for 2025 this May (14th-17th), With a lineup packed with future stars and thrilling new voices, from Chloe Qisha's razor-sharp pop sensibilities and Lynks' flamboyant, anarchic brilliance, to the emotionally charged indie-rock of Florence Road. Throw in the angular wit of English Teacher, Picture Parlour's effortlessly cool swagger, and Witch Post's dark, brooding intensity, and you've got an unmissable showcase of emerging talent. Plus there's the noisy brilliance of HotWax, Punchbag's raw energy, and the intriguingly abrasive Man/Woman/Chainsaw, alongside fresh acts like Luvcat, Nxida, and the mysterious charm of Sunday (1994). Not forgetting the vibrant eclecticism of Miso Extra, the powerful hooks of The Pill, Total Tommy's infectious melodies and Chloe Slater's magnetic stage presence - it's clear that Brighton remains the essential place to discover the artists you'll be obsessing over next year. Bring comfortable shoes and an open mind.

6 NORTHERN UPROAR

→ Live at Leeds: In The Park returns for 2025, promising another glorious day of indie indulgence at Temple Newsam. Headlining the affair, Bloc Party will celebrate 20 years of 'Silent Alarm' by playing it front-to-back, a set guaranteed to spark nostalgia - and probably a few joyous tears. Alongside them, the ever-defiant Manic Street Preachers and hometown heroes Yard Act bring politically charged rock and biting wit in equal measure, while Sigrid's effervescent pop provides a welcome dash of Scandinavian sparkle.

Over at Dork's stage, the lineup bristles with promise: Arthur Hill's soaring anthems, Chloe Slater's captivating indie-pop, and Brogeal's raw energy are all worth showing up early for. Meanwhile, Sunday (1994) offer a beguiling blend of melody and melancholy, making this Leeds festival feel like a frontline preview of the next wave of essential UK talent. Expect sunburn, memorable performances, and enough musical discoveries to keep your playlists fresh until autumn.



7 PLANET POP

WHAT STARTED AS ALBUM EXTRAS HAS BECOME SOMETHING SPECIAL, AS WISHY EMBRACE POP EXPERIMENTATION ON THEIR LATEST EP, 'PLANET POPSTAR'.

WORDS: FELICITY NEWTON

→ Wishy's new EP 'Planet Popstar' — arriving 25th April via Winspear — transforms what might have been mere album offcuts into something far more vital. These six tracks, emerging from the same sessions as their debut 'Triple Seven', chart their own distinct path through dream-pop territory. The band saw something special here, and honestly? They were totally right.

Rather than relegating these recordings to B-side status, they're realising their unique potential. As Nina Pitchkites explains, "It's not that they were wrong; we just had a lot to choose from and didn't want to make the album super long. They're also more pop-centric and laid back than the others, so kinda makes sense for them to go together."

This relaxed approach belies the careful curation at work as these songs reveal new facets of Wishy's artistic vision. The EP merges shoegaze textures with surprisingly danceable rhythms, like My Bloody Valentine deciding to remix a lost Madonna track from 1983.

The experimentation feels both playful and purposeful. "Pop songs with breakbeats and bongos are just fun," Pitchkites notes with characteristic enthusiasm. It's this willingness to colour outside genre lines that gives 'Planet Popstar' its distinct character — less a bunch of leftovers than a bold step into new territory.

Among the standouts is 'Chaser', which holds special significance as a highlight for Pitchkites, too. "Partially because I wrote it, but also the idea for it was a bug in my ear for so long that it feels good to see it realised," she shares. The track exemplifies how Wishy can transform creative restlessness into magic pop moments.

When asked about the ideal response to the EP, Pitchkites offers an answer that encapsulates Wishy's artistic ethos: "That it resembles a childlike sense of wonder." It's a joyful aspiration in an often cynical world, and one that 'Planet Popstar' achieves with remarkable consistency.

The release comes at a moment when Wishy seems poised for even bigger things. Their trajectory since 'Triple Seven' has been steadily ascending, and Pitchkites' relationship with their debut remains warmly optimistic. "It's our debut record and our best one thus far, so I still love it very much because I made it with people I love and care about. Having that record out inspires me to make an even better one."

This creative momentum shows no signs of slowing. The band have confirmed that work on new material is already underway, with the EP's experimental spirit informing their future direction. When asked if 'Planet Popstar' will influence their next batch of material, Pitchkites' response is succinct but promising: "Yes."

In the meantime, Wishy aren't just waiting around. Beyond music, they maintain a charmingly DIY approach to band life. Pitchkites casually mentions, "I'm currently embroidering some band tees for my friend Kellen, who's in an awesome band called Good Flying Birds." It's this kind of personal touch that helps maintain the band's connection to their indie roots even as their sound grows more ambitious.

The coming months will see Wishy taking their evolved sound on the road. "We're going on tour with Momma in May, which we're very excited about; they rock, and I can't wait to rock with them," Pitchkites enthuses. The extensive North American tour will hit major cities from Los Angeles to New York, offering audiences a chance to experience how these more pop-oriented songs translate to the stage.



"POP SONGS WITH BREAKBEATS AND BONGOS ARE JUST FUN"

NINA PITCHKITES

Between shows, the band keeps things refreshingly down-to-earth. Their off-stage pursuits read like a perfect indie-rock weekend: "Sew, hacky sack, watch movies, hang out, play pool." It's this balance of serious musical ambition and unpretentious fun that makes Wishy such a compelling proposition.

'Planet Popstar' arrives as both a gift to existing fans and an invitation to new listeners. It's a reminder that B-sides are more than afterthoughts — they can be portals to new creative territories. In Wishy's hands, these songs become something rare and precious: pop music that maintains its underground heart while reaching for the stars. Sometimes, the best way forward is to embrace joy with open arms. ■

BLUE SKY THINKING

BROOKLYN BAND **MOMMA** HAVE TRANSFORMED TWO MONTHS OF LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCES INTO THEIR MOST INTIMATE AND REVEALING RECORD YET.

→ Momma's evolution from indie-rock's newest darlings to introspective chroniclers reaches its apex on 'Welcome to My Blue Sky', their fourth studio album. The Brooklyn band's latest offering excavates the whirlwind summer of 2022 when sixty days of touring reshaped their creative trajectory.

Songwriters Etta Friedman and Allegra Weingarten emerged from that period with stories that demanded telling. "The summer of 2022, we went on a really long two-month tour, and a lot happened on that tour that really flipped our worlds upside down," they reflect, detailing a season marked by "personal drama, relationships ending and new love blossoming."

Their twelve-track collection marks a considered departure from their previous record, 'Household Name'. After taking a year to process their experiences, autumn 2023 found the pair stripping their sound to its essence - acoustic guitars and intertwined voices carrying the weight of their revelations.

"It definitely influenced how lyric-based the record ended up being," Weingarten explains. "When it's just us two with an acoustic guitar, we focus mainly on the lyrics and melodies as opposed to complex guitar arrangements."

The album's breakthrough arrived with 'I Want You (Fever)', a composition so compelling it prompted a creative reset. "We probably had about four songs that we scrapped after we wrote 'Fever'," Weingarten recalls. "Those songs weren't even for the record necessarily; we were kind of just trying to exercise our songwriting muscles and were stumbling through a lot of ideas, and then Fever happened, and we were like, oh, we know what we're doing now."

Friedman elaborates: "I think that that song taught us to jump on the ideas that felt immediate and exciting. Sometimes we can harp on one song for ages simply because we really like the chorus melody or something. But then, after a while, it starts to feel taxing to even work through an idea that felt so exciting in the first place."

Songs like 'Ohio All The Time' and 'My Old Street' chart emotional cartography with precise detail. "Being out on the road completely informed the entire record," Weingarten notes. "When we both had our little romances on tour, we realised how much we associated those special moments with specific places. I'm kind of obsessed with the idea that you could be walking past a street corner where a total stranger had the best kiss of their life, and you would never know. You'd forget that street corner, but there's a person out there that worships it in their memory."

The meticulous assembly of their second album proved as vital as its creation. The band took great care with the track sequencing, as Friedman notes: "We wrote 'Sincerely' knowing that it was going to be the first song. It's kind of the thesis statement of the record, I think. 'Take Me With You' is almost a response to 'Sincerely', but it didn't feel quite right to end the record with it. Originally, I think we liked the idea of the opening and ending track being a bit of a yin-yang or a call and response, but then I think when we finished writing 'My Old Street', we knew it was a pretty epic closer."

The final track emerged as a profound moment for both artists. "We pulled it out really last minute, so I kind of always forget about it, but I think it's a song that Etta and I have needed to write for years, and I'm really proud of us that we eventually let it out," Weingarten reflects.

The album's candour occasionally tested personal limits. Weingarten reveals: "We actually changed a lyric in 'Take Me With You' because it was too personal. But I think that was the only lyric we changed for that reason. There are a lot of things we won't talk about in interviews because it's too personal, but when you're writing a song, it's kind of a different story. You need to just let it out and worry about it later."

Friedman elaborates: "I feel like if we got any more personal with the lyrics, some things could maybe come across as mean, in a way. It's a really emotionally charged record, and a lot of how we processed those two months was truly through writing. There were several times when I didn't even know I was feeling so angry, or hurt, or sad, or excited even, until the song was finished and I listened back to it."

Their collaborative process strengthens with each release. "I get way more excited about the songs that we collaborate on together versus the solo tracks that we have," Friedman shares. "It's just way more fun to solve that puzzle together, and then it's even more rewarding to play live. There have been a few really beautiful moments where we have looked at each other on stage like, 'Woah, I cannot believe people are singing these words back to us right now.' It feels really empowering to do it all together."

Their aspirations remain refreshingly direct: "All I want to do is quit my job," they say. "And I want to meet other artists that I admire and maybe write songs with them, too. And I want to tour all the time!"

Those touring dreams materialise with a headline tour planned for spring, followed by festival appearances in Barcelona, Portugal, and the UK. A fitting evolution for music born from the peculiar alchemy of touring life. ■ **Momma's album 'Welcome To My Blue Sky' is out now.**

WORDS: SAM TAYLOR.



9 EURO YEE-HAW

→ CMAT's new album 'Euro-Country', out 29th August, promises another witty and wonderfully oddball chapter in her ongoing pop-country saga. Lead single 'Running/Planning' mixes CMAT's trademark sharp lyrics with breezy hooks, cleverly skewering societal expectations with deceptive ease. It's music that pairs existential dread with danceable flair, confirming CMAT's unique talent for blending laughter, tears, and an infectious chorus into one seamless, irresistible package.



10 HAIMY WIMEY

→ Haim return triumphantly with their new single 'Relationships', a slick, funk-infused dissection of romantic angst that sees the sisters at their effortlessly cool best. Produced by Danielle Haim and Rostam, it teeters between buoyant groove and knowing introspection—classic Haim territory delivered with added swagger. As an opening statement for their upcoming album, it suggests a record equally ready for reflective headphone listening or blasting from festival stages. Trust Haim to turn emotional turmoil into pop gold.



JUICE

FRESHLY SQUEEZED MUSIC NEWS.



NIGHT CHANG

After The Regrettes' farewell, punk-turned-pop artist **Lydia Night** embraces imperfection and self-discovery on bold solo debut 'Pity Party'.

WORDS: **ALI SHUTLER**

"I absolutely adored being in The Regrettes, but I feel so empowered about going solo," says Lydia Night, a week before she drops her debut single 'Pity Party'. "I'm almost ashamed of how good I feel right now."

With The Regrettes, Lydia made three albums of woozy, pop-infused rock, but after struggling to find a direction for the follow-up to 2022's 'Further Joy', the band announced their break up. "It was such a fulfilling journey, and I didn't want it to ever feel like we were beating a dead horse," Lydia tells Dork. "It was just this gut feeling that things were over, which was scary as fuck."

The band finished up a farewell tour in December 2022, and the following month, Lydia began writing what would become her debut solo album. It's due out later this year and takes inspiration from 'Blackout'-era Britney Spears, Gwen Stefani, The 1975 and Gorillaz. "I know I'm going to lose some people with this music, but I hope I make fans of The Regrettes proud," she says.

Our first taste of this new era is 'Pity Party', a ballsy statement of intent from an artist who wants to make pop music her way. "I wrote maybe 50 demos, and there were a lot of great songs – but a lot of them felt like music that anybody could make. The goal for me was to make pop songs that only Lydia Night could make."



"POP IS AT ITS BEST WHEN IT'S NOT ASHAMED OF BEING FUN"

LYDIA NIGHT

A Lydia Night song is self-deprecating but also delusionally confident, she explains. "I can make fun of myself while also knowing I'm awesome and a bad bitch. That's the vibe. We're all embarrassing; we're all fucking idiots at times. It's about owning that, but also talking about my feelings and feeling powerful."

Sitting in the centre of the sonic world Lydia has crafted for her debut album, 'Pity Party' is the perfect introduction to this new chapter. The first idea for the track came back in 2021, and the song has gone through several evolutions over the years, including being mashed up with another work in progress.

"She's a special one," says Lydia. "As soon as we made it, I knew it should start the album because it touches on all the darker bits that come up in the album later, but it still has this brightness to it. There's a lot of cathartic energy."

The song is about wanting people to validate your experiences because you can't do it yourself. "'Pity Party' is a trauma dump," says Lydia. "I've cried so many times listening to it. There's a lot of fun shit coming but I needed to tell this story first, otherwise everything would just feel too bubblegum pop."

"The song is very specific to me, so I really don't know what other people will make of it. I just hope they can laugh at themselves a little bit and feel less alone. Everyone has their own cocktail of trauma that they've been through, and it's okay to feel sorry for yourself... but being able to laugh about it is important as well," she explains. "I know that's the only way I'm able to get through."

According to Lydia, her upcoming album is fun, weird and imperfect. "Nothing is too shiny. You can hear that I wrote it in two people's bedrooms that I'm really close to, where I was crying my eyes out but also laughing my ass off. It's been the most real recording process I've ever had," Lydia continues, describing it as friends hanging out and making music together. "The whole thing feels very personal, like we're sitting together in a room, and we're complaining about some fucking dude or talking about how I'm super into this girl. It's very conversational."

A lot of the music is also about acknowledging the darkness but choosing to find the light, which feels like an important energy to be putting out into the world right now. "Obviously, everything is fucked, and there's nothing new I can say on that, but all we have in our little blips of a lifetime is other people, love, laughter and all that cheesy but true shit," she says. "Music is such a beautiful way to communicate with each other but also enjoy your own presence." Last night, Lydia got home, put on Tyla and danced around her house for 30 minutes. "I hope people do that with my music. It's so important to just be silly sometimes."

As well as the album, there are also plans in place for live shows later this year. "And thank God because I've missed it so much," she grins. "I want a Lydia Night gig to be a big-ass dance party where people are just moving however the hell they want. I want it to offer people a release in whatever way they need and for them to leave feeling refreshed."

"I'm ambitious. I can see myself playing really big rooms but not at the cost of putting out music that I don't believe in," she says. "I'm just doing shit because it feels right. Sometimes, that'll result in terrible decisions and sometimes, it'll work. I'm only 24... what better time to do that?"

Her personality-driven pop also comes at a time when messy, complex and giddy pop has taken over the world thanks to artists such as Olivia Rodrigo, Chappell Roan, Charli xcx and Sabrina Carpenter.

"It's a super inspiring time. Pop is at its best when it's not ashamed of being fun. I love unapologetically fun music that people can sing along with and dance to." The most inspiring artist from this new crop of superstars is Billie Eilish. "She changed what a pop artist can be. Everyone came to her and she just continued to do what felt right for her. She's never wavered, and I don't plan on wavering either."

"There's something about being confident and bringing that to the table, while also being messy, making those mistakes and letting that be okay," Lydia continues. "No matter what happens, I'm excited. My album is deliberately imperfect, but that's what being human is. I hope people see me as just another person trying their best because what else is there?" ■ **Lydia Night's single 'Pity Party' is out now.**

STAR PO

As global chaos reigns, **Employed To Serve** return with 'Fallen Star', a rallying cry for inclusivity that proves metal's power to unite rather than divide.

WORDS: **CIARAN PICKER** PHOTOS: **ANASTASIA SANCHEZ**

Employed to Serve seem to reappear just when we need them most. Releasing 'The Warmth of a Dying Sun' in post-Brexit 2017, 'Eternal Forward Motion' in Trumpian 2019, and 'Conquering' in Covid-ridden 2021, they act as a barometer for the state of the planet, seeming always to know when we need a death metal rallying cry to get us through all *gestures wildly* this.

Now, here we are in 2025, with all the scars of the past ten years being reopened and replaced by global fascism, climate disasters, and a Warped Tour lineup that... well, let's just say it leaves a lot to be desired. Thankfully, Employed to Serve have taken the pulse of the world around them and returned with their searing call to arms, 'Fallen Star'.

An amalgamation of hardcore breakdowns, ferocious death metal guitar lines, and relentlessly pulsating nu-metal drumming, it is an album that represents a band at full-throttle. Whether it's in the almost glam metal feel of the licks and riffs in opener 'Treachery', the soaring chorus of title track 'Fallen Star', or the swirling cult-like aura of 'Breaks Me Down', Employed to Serve have set fire to the rulebook and started the revolution – and you're all coming along for the ride.

'Fallen Star' is the latest in a catalogue that never stays in one place too long, one that refuses to give in to hackneyed clichés and tired assumptions that all metal musicians are full of hate. If anything, lead vocalist Justine Jones is the opposite, instead taking her cues from the bands that determined to create music that felt progressive rather than oppressive.

"I can only talk about Hatebreed when I give this answer," she smiles, "because I was so inspired by the positive metal vibe of 'Perseverance'. I'm not a fan of us trying to be a negative band because it's not who we are as people; we all love the idea of metal telling you to do better and be better. We wanted to make an empowering record; it's a battle cry."

Employed to Serve aren't a band to play it safe, splicing together myriad metal sub-genres to create the melodic yet murderous sound that has made them heavyweights of the British metal scene. Trying to combine sounds from thrash metal, death metal, hardcore, mathcore, and about fifteen other identifiable sub-genres could easily result in a sound too massive to tame. Instead, 'Fallen Star' is a considered, hand-picked selection of tracks and concepts that creates nuance in amongst the addictively gnarly soundscape.

"Some of my favourite records are all-out war, but we wanted light and shade on the record. We're getting there with it now, but it is tough because you consciously have to think about it. We're more critical of what songs we include because, even in the age of streaming, metal has always been an album-led genre, it needs to work as a whole or there's no point."

Employed to Serve's reputation precedes them, allowing them to call on the help of some of the biggest names in metal to add that final sprinkling of magic that lets 'Fallen Star' shine so brightly. From Lorna Shore's Will Ramos to Killswitch Engage's Jesse Leach and Svalbard's Serena Cherry, they were the final piece of the puzzle.

"I've listened to Killswitch since I was 14 so it's wild now to say we have a song with Jesse, and we did our first tour with Svalbard, so Serena has been a friend for 10 years now."

"Then, with Will, we only asked him to do the death metal vocal because we didn't know he could sing clean. He came in and did so many different things – the death metal screaming, clean singing, some goblincore shit too. He just made the song his own, it was great."

Just in case you'd got this far and thought, blimey, this metal band lark sounds a doddle, it does come with its pitfalls:

"I have to record my vocal for all the demos in the bathroom in our flat," Justine grins, "it's the only room with an outside wall so I have to use that, or the neighbours might call the police! We have new people in next door, so we had to go over and say, 'We're in a band. If you hear any screaming or anything, don't worry about it!'"

That the quintet managed to channel so much time and work into 'Fallen Star' – including bathroom studio time – is made even more admirable by the fact that they all work full-time alongside the band, with Justine heading up both Church Road Records and Since Always Press alongside husband Sammy, managing to immerse themselves totally in the music scene that has given them both a home since they were fourteen-year-olds. More importantly, though, they've found a way to balance it so that they get the most from every facet of their impressive portfolio.

"We've only just figured out how to make an album and not rush it. I blew my voice out trying to do all the vocals in two days on the last album, but I did a song a day this time, and it was bliss!"

"Would I want to do the band full-time? I actually don't think so. I have a really overactive brain, so I like to jump around and flit between all the different bits that we do. I love the camaraderie of it; it keeps you stoked about things. It's an amazing feeling when a band you're working with gets into a magazine or gets a radio play; it just keeps you grateful about everything."

This sense of community has always been at the very centre of Employed to Serve, always standing tall as a band for anyone and everyone, summed up nicely in the phrase 'Heavy Metal Unity', something that Justine is understandably proud to promote at every turn.

"We like the idea of being inclusive, we want to be a band for all ages, all walks of life. Don't get me wrong, I was very much a gatekeeper at 14, but now I hate the idea of shutting yourself off from people – like, come on, we all got bullied at school for being goths, stop trying to be cool, we're all in this together! I love walking around Bloodstock or Download Festival and seeing parents and kids in matching battle jackets. Metal is all-encompassing; it's a community."

Justine feels this particularly strongly as, still, metal tries to find a way to battle against the male bias that has long been a criticism of the genre. It's telling that this album cycle has seen an aesthetic change, with Justine ditching the oversized graphic tees in favour of flowing dresses and a red lip, a celebration of femininity that would have been frowned upon in the scene until relatively recently.

"WE WANTED TO MAKE AN EMPOWERING RECORD; IT'S A BATTLE CRY"

JUSTINE JONES

OWER



As bands and artists such as Spiritbox, Poppy, and Pupil Slicer fight their way to the top, maybe metal is finally addressing the blatant sexism and misogyny that made it such an unwelcoming place for young female performers.

"I came to this realisation that I'd dressed the same way since I was fourteen, so I thought I'd look into high fashion; I channelled my inner Moira Rose from Schitt's Creek."

"It turns out you don't have to dress like a smelly-looking metal person – crazy, right?! There was definitely pressure to blend in with and dress like the blokes, especially because we were always described as a female-fronted band instead of by a genre. There'd always be someone down the front going, 'urgh, it's a girl; why have they let one of those in?'"

"It's better than it was, for sure. I've always loved the theatricality of pop shows mixed with the trad metal look, you want it to be fantasy and other-worldly, so I'm going to wear what I want and do what I want; there's always going to be some horrible YouTube comment somewhere, but who cares?"

While there's still a way to go, there are plenty of metalheads actively encouraging the inclusion of people who have traditionally felt exiled from the scene, an act that Justine feels is managing to promote instead of patronise bands who are – let's be honest - non-male and non-white.

"It's a fine line isn't it, but I think at the moment it's an important step. There needs to be more visibility like there has been for women's football, for example. If a young girl sees me on the cover of a Spotify 'Women in Metal' playlist and thinks, 'Hey, maybe I can do that', then that's a win, without doubt."

Justine's focus on metal for the masses aligns with a renaissance in the scene, one that's seen Sleep Token and Spiritbox sell out arenas, Gojira smash up the Paris Olympics opening ceremony, and Knocked Loose and Poppy bring banshee screams and pig squeals to Jimmy Kimmel's late-night show in the US.

"I use Urban Outfitters as my mark for if something's popular or not," Justine grins. "If an album's in there, then it's clearly accessible for a wide array of people. Obviously, I'm only in this for the money and fame – I'm like Mr. Krabs in a woman suit – so it would be great to see 'Fallen Star' in there!"

As much as metal is back in fashion, the scene is facing the same financial problems as bands and artists in all other parts of the industry. As a band member, record label and PR firm owner, Justine feels this particularly acutely.

"I want music to make money again. It's really concerning, the current model just isn't sustainable. There needs to be a better way for bands to make money - regulation of royalties on streams or something. It becomes a class issue; gigs will just become a rich person's playground."

Even in this world, where profit continues to overpower public morale, Employed to Serve is determined to bring an undimmable sense of empowerment to their music. There's arguably never been a more important time for bands to take up the mantle of morale-boosting, fan-healing therapists. Justine cherishes this role, which explains Employed to Serve's enduring appeal and status as one of the most exciting metal bands around.

"Basically, we're saying nothing matters, but in a gleeful way," she explains. "We're all tiny specks in an infinite universe, so don't fucking sweat it. The world's going to shit, so you might as well have fun, right?" ■

Employed To Serve's album 'Fallen Star' is out 25th April.

GROWL

Toronto's finest punk exports **PUP** return to their roots with a stripped-back record that captures their legendary live energy.

WORDS: ROB MAIR PHOTOS: MARTYNA WISNIEWSKA



PUPS

"We've been very lucky to be in the kind of band that had grown slowly and organically over all our records," says PUP's affable vocalist and songwriter Stefan Babcock. "You see artists where they get a hit, and they suddenly go from playing from 50 people to 2,000 people, and I can only imagine the problems that come with that. I can't really understand or relate to it.

"Our last London headline show was at the Roundhouse. If you'd have suddenly plopped me down there in 2016, I'd have shit myself. "

It's been a steady grind for Toronto's PUP since the 2013 release of their brilliant self-titled debut. At each stage, however, they've brought more people with them, culminating in the widescreen breakout of 2022's kaleidoscopic punk rock opera 'The Unravelling of PUPtheband'. Along the way, they've frequently met with critical acclaim – including nods from the prestigious Polaris and Juno awards committees. Now the quartet – completed by guitarist Steve Sladkowski, bassist Nestor Chumak and drummer Zack Mykula – are back with 'Who Will Look After the Dogs?' – and it's their best outing yet.

Today, appropriately, Stefan is dog-sitting an eight-week-old pup who is intent on causing mischief and mayhem. After learning how to open the puppy gate, there'll be frequent pauses when the pup escapes from "doggy jail" to stop it from causing damage or harm to itself. It is adorably cute, and Stefan's rightly smitten.

Appropriately, such chaos feels like a fitting portent for a chat with the band that gave us songs like 'If This Tour Doesn't Kill You, I Will', and where the biography for the new record claimed that the four members "don't like each other" when they're making records.

"I would much rather be in a band with people who care so much that there's a lot of contention in it," says Stefan. "The best version of our band is when we're all fighting because we all want the same thing. I mean, it's not like one of us wants to be a ska band and another wants to be an indie rock band – and I use that as an example because I have been in that exact situation – we all want the same thing, and that's what unites us."

The process may sound counter-intuitive, but the results speak for themselves – and they have done on every record the quartet has released. From the naked aggression and youthful exuberance of 'PUP' through to the bitingly-self-aware growth on 'Morbid Stuff' and bold experimentation on 'The Unravelling of PUPtheband' they've managed to build a flawless discography where each record captures the headspace of PUP, and in particular Stefan, in a specific moment in time.

To an extent, 'Who Will Look After the Dogs?' is a blend of all of these things; it starts with a couple of ragers – 'No Hope' and 'Olive Garden' – both of which are prime PUP punk blasts and perfect for frenzied mosh pits. Yet three of the final four tracks – 'Hallways', 'Best Revenge and 'Shut Up' – might be the most elegant and nuanced take on their identifiable sound to date.

In between, PUP run the gamut of emotions, from anger to regret to nihilism – as per all the best PUP songs. They're a band known for irreverence, searing humour and forthright honesty – and all these traits run through 'Who Will Look After the Dogs?', like a pack of wolves on the hunt. "The other records, they've been little snapshots of what's been going on in my life over a six-month period. This one, I started writing it from a dark place, but I really didn't want to make a breakup record. I started to reflect on these different experiences and different stages in my life, and a lot of stuff came out of that. It was nice.

"It feels like a different PUP record, lyrically. It feels like a journey from me being a little shithead to me being a bigger – no, older – shithead. But I'm also more self-aware and more empathetic, too. There's a lot more emotional breadth, and there's a wider spectrum of emotions and maturity on this record. There are very mature moments and extremely immature moments – and I think that's what excites me."

> "WE FIGHT, BUT WE KNOW WHAT WE'RE FIGHTING FOR"
>
> **STEFAN BABCOCK**

The word 'mature', however, can be like napalm to punk rock fans, leading to charges that the band has "gone soft" or, worse still, "sold out". These aren't things you could level at PUP or 'Who Will Look After the Dogs?', but you could legitimately call it the John K Samsonising of PUP the band with some justification.

For the uninitiated, Samson was one-time Propaghandi bassist turned punk poet with the Weakerthans, and now widely revered as the best Canadian songwriter of his generation. Whisper it quietly, but in Babcock, there might just be a new contender for the crown.

But the crossover doesn't end there; Samson is a PUP favourite, and they've regularly covered the Weakerthans' 'Plea from a Cat Named Virtute' on tour, while 'Hallways' – inspired by Better Oblivion Community Centre's 'Dylan Thomas' – also shares a passing similarity to the Winnipeg heroes' gorgeous 'Sun in an Empty Room'. 'Shut Up', meanwhile, might be the only pop-punk song to contain lyrics about a Master's thesis since, well, John K Samson's very own 'When I Write My Master's Thesis'.

Yet, while Babcock has undoubtedly grown as a songwriter, for 'Who Will Look After the Dogs?', PUP have leaned into their raw punk sound to accompany it. It's rough, unpolished, and the closest record to capturing the live PUP experience since their incendiary debut.

"We're really proud of what we accomplished on the last record," says Stefan, "but this time, we wanted to take the exact opposite approach. We wanted to strip it back to how we recorded the first PUP record, when it was just literally the four of us in a room playing. We wanted to focus on getting the energy right, and not worry too much about the mistakes, overdubs, or adding too many instruments. On the last record, with Peter [Katis, producer], we were hyper-focused on playing everything perfectly, and if there was any space, we'd try and fill it with extra instrumentation or harmonies. This one, we really went back to the roots of being confident in the fact that we're a really good live band, and we wanted to capture that spirit and energy."

It means that 'Who Will Look After the Dogs?' finds the sweet spot between craft and passion. It's an album engineered beautifully, with some of Babcock's best lyrical work contained within, but it's also delivered with a freeness that captures PUP at their blistering best.

Stefan estimates that he wrote about 30 songs for the record – a complete change-up from the normally svelte writing process that preceded previous records. Of course, he had a lot of stuff to work through, but changes in circumstance meant that he could throw himself into work without much of a support net to fall back on. He's also been writing with and for other artists – a lesson in empathy, he'll attest – but such developments also bring hard-headed decisions. In short, it means there's no 'making do' on 'Who Will Look After the Dogs?' – just the 12 best songs from Stefan's songbook.

"Sometimes, I'll feel like a song sucks, but there's something in it, some value," says Stefan when thinking about this process. "There has to be something there for you if you've gone and spent a whole day on it, right? But I think I wrote through the bad stuff.

"As I said, I didn't want to make a breakup record at all, but this is the first time I've made a record where I wasn't with someone. My bandmates are my best friends, but when we're writing and making a record, we spend so much time together that things can get heated, and we tend to withdraw from one another. We don't hang out socially. Normally, I'd turn all that social energy to the person that I'm with. I couldn't do that. I just didn't have any of that support. So, I found comfort in writing songs, which is convenient for the project, but I'm sure there's an element of that which is unhealthy, just diving into work to help you get through every single day.

"I'm sure there was some frustration from my bandmates when I would come in each morning as they'd get going on something good, and I would want to switch up songs. I'm not the easiest person to work with in general. I have a great admiration for all my bandmates," laughs Stefan.

And this, in truth, is why PUP works; Stefan clearly loves his bandmates. In much the same way as the Menzingers remain four best pals who have taken their brand of blue-collar punk rock all over the world, PUP are in the same boat; a band of brothers who strike gold record after record. For PUP, that comes through friction and opposition, by challenging each other to be the best they can be; for not half-arsing it or phoning it in, but appreciating the gift that's in front of them and working together for that greater good. With 'Who Will Look After the Dogs?' they've again reached a new high watermark. ■ **PUP's album 'Who Will Look After The Dogs?' is out 2nd May.**

TEENAGE KICKS



THIS MONTH...

WITCH POST

EVERYONE HAS THOSE FORMATIVE TRACKS THAT FIRST GOT THEM INTO MUSIC AND HELPED SHAPE THEIR VERY BEING. THIS MONTH, ALASKA REID AND DYLAN FRASER TAKE US THROUGH THE MUSIC THAT MEANT THE MOST TO THEM DURING THEIR TEENAGE YEARS.

DINOSAUR JR.

START CHOPPIN'



ALASKA→ J is one of the main reasons I play guitar. This riff is particularly awesome. I could choose 'Get Me' or 'The Post' or 'The Wagon' or 'Thumb', but I guess I'm in a 'Start Choppin'' mood right now. When I was in elementary school in Montana, my dad would drive me through the Paradise Valley every morning, blasting Dino CDs. I've seen Dino so many times, and I still tear up at every show. Dino's music feels like a lifelong friend. When I listen to Dino, I remember how I felt when I was a teenager first writing songs. J's lyrics are so simple and cool as well. He embeds intimate dialogues within massive riffs that carry you away.

KT TUNSTALL

OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD



DYLAN→ This song and her album 'Eye To The Telescope' is one of my first memories of music. My mum used to play this album in her car all the time. This song feels like a warm hug to me. I don't have much to say about this apart from it's just a fucking great song.

ELLA FITZGERALD

BLACK COFFEE



ALASKA→ When I was a teenager and taking voice lessons, I sang a lot of the Ella songs. She has multiple incredible vocal moments in 'Black Coffee' that I would try to sing along with. It's almost as if she's doing a guitar lick but with her voice. I still marvel at how smooth and effortless her singing sounds. Back in Montana, I thought I was going to be an opera singer; then, I started singing and listening to Ella's songs! She reminds me of when I first moved to California and my musical world opened up. I remember bothering some pianist at an Italian restaurant in Van Nuys, hoping he'd let me sing some standards with him.

DAUGHTER

YOUTH



DYLAN→ If you were anywhere near tumblr in 2013 you knew this song. This was probably one of my first introductions to the world of melancholy, haha. Desaturated and the fade filter up max. I fell in love with Elena Tonra's voice. I used to sing this song at open mic's at venues in my hometown. Would highly recommend her Ex:Re album. I love how simple her songs are, there's a lot of space in them but her lyrics and her voice really fill it and paint a picture in your mind.

THE MILK LUNGS

START FROM SCRATCH



ALASKA→ The album 'I'll Take It' was huge for me. 'Black Balloon' into 'Start from Scratch' blew my mind. 'Start from Scratch' has a really manic scrambled eggs in the brain quality to it. The production on this record is so crazy, especially how it meshes with the songwriting. I didn't actually know what production was until I was older, so looking back, I realise this was probably one of the first times I was thinking of what production could do, but in an abstract sense. I like how the vocals change song by song. I was listening to this album before the internet was something I used. I'd stare at the cover and listen to the songs and really wonder, "Why did they do this"? I think this feeling was really important, the wonder and the mystery of why a certain artist does something. Also, because this was before streaming, I thought this band was really big. At the time, I lived in a place no one toured anyway, so I never understood if a band or musician was successful. If I heard a song, it I just thought it was popular. I actually really miss that from being younger because I just took art at strictly face value.

NOEL GALLAGHER'S HIGH FLYING BIRDS

OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD



DYLAN→ My dad had this album and would play it constantly in the car. It's funny because I feel like I knew this album before I knew any Oasis songs, like this was the first album that I knew back to front. Against my own will because my dad would just always play it, but I wasn't complaining.

LORETTA LYNN & JACK WHITE

PORTLAND OREGON



ALASKA→ This was an important song for me and my sisters. I loved the story of it all; I loved how Jack and Loretta were also so different, and the story in the lyrics speaks to that, too. Two strangers drunk and lonely on Sloe Gin Fizz in a Portland bar, that's a short story! I learned to sing by listening to Loretta. She's one of those people for me. I love her tone and delivery, it's so special, so confident and simple. The guitars rock on this song, too; it has an iconic intro. My sisters and I would sing this song in my parent's minivan. Loretta's 'Van Lear Rose' was another big one for me, I loved the story, I loved that it was about a woman; most songs are about dudes thinking about women. I listen to these two songs back to back and think how cool it is that Loretta had such a long and quality career.

LANA DEL RAY

VIDEO GAMES



DYLAN→ Again, I have my mum to thank for this one. My mum bought this album after hearing one of Lana's songs on the radio, and she'd play it in the car. I always feel like it should've been me showing her this album,, but I was 11 when this came out, so I don't think I was really aware of what was happening culturally at that point. I just remember being really taken by Lana's voice and the music. It felt cool to me but also weird. In ways, it was sort of my introduction to more obscure voices which today are generally my favourite. I'm never drawn to "technically" good singers, it's all about emotion for me, and Lana is really amazing at conveying that.

JONI MITCHELL

COYOTE



ALASKA→ This song will never leave my life. I always think about this song, everything from the lyrics to Joni's vocal delivery to the production. As I say above, this song is also a short story, or a novel. My mom would always say when I was a teen, try to sing along to this song. It's so hard; once you get it, you'll have mastered something special. It's hard to articulate, but the vocal phrasing ties in with the emotions in such an important way. It's got such a visual beauty as well. You can look at any landscape and imagine Joni's appaloosas, eagles and tides. Her line, "Staring a hole in his scrambled eggs / picks up my scent on his fingers while he's watching a waitresses' legs". I've thought about that line and that character so much. Teen me was probably like, watch out for that guy in Joni's song; you're going to meet someone like this if you keep making rock music. Like all great songs, they become something that you fit around your own life, or it feels like the artist is whispering into your mind. This is one of those songs that's very personal, very imaginative. It gains more depth the older I get as well - each listen is new both sonically and lyrically.



A DAY IN THE LIFE OF...

ALIEN CHICKS

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 VERY MINUTE? ASKING THEM. THIS MONTH, WE NAB **MARTHA DANIELS** FROM **ALIEN CHICKS** TO SPY ON 24 HOURS IN HER LIFE.

6:00AM→ I wake up in a panic, wondering if my bandmates Joe and Stef have managed to wake up in time. We have an early flight to Vienna for Waves Festival, and they were at a party until 4am the night before celebrating English Teacher's Mercury Prize win (this is a much more glamorous 24 hours than we would normally have).

8:00AM→ I get to the airport and find the boys asleep in a café. We plan in great detail for the inevitable argument we would have to have with Ryanair because we always buy only one seat for two guitars, which apparently goes against their policy.

9:00AM→ We get to the Ryanair check-in desk, and the steward immediately tells us we have too many bags. We are rewarded with a £65 extra bag fine. We board the plane praying that festivals in Austria have free beers and food.

1:00PM→ We get to Vienna and are already 20 minutes late for our soundcheck, so we jump in a taxi (another financial mistake) and get a great view of the city on the drive to the venue. Joe calls his grandma to show her the city.

1:15PM→ We get to the venue, apologise for being late, and are surprised by the warm welcome and the free beer and snacks. The sound engineer is friendly and likes our songs.

3:00PM→ We check in to our hostel and have our usual competitions of who can do the loudest fart, who is the most tired, and who can insult the other two the most.

8:00PM→ Gig time. We get to the venue, and it's packed already, which gets us very hyped up. This part makes all the travel, tiredness, Ryanair ordeals, and lack of toothpaste so worth it.

10:00PM→ It's time to go to our second gig of the night, which, believe it or not, is at 'Wiener Wurstelstand' - a sausage stall on the outskirts of the city. When they sent us a message on Instagram asking us to play there, we naturally jumped at the chance.

10:30PM→ We arrive at Wiener Wurstelstand and are greeted by the sweet smell of sausages and a DJ playing pop bangers. The dream. We set up and wonder whether people will want to listen to jazzy rappy post-punk in strange time signatures while eating their sausages.

11:00PM→ Our prayers are answered. People absolutely love it. They watch intently and dance around, sausage in one hand, beer in the other. They shout 'one more song' at the end. We hang around for ages afterwards, making friends. Who'd have thought playing at a sausage stall could make us feel like stars? ■

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SAM AKPRO

"MY MUSICAL INFLUENCES CAME FROM THE SKATE VIDEOS I WAS WATCHING AND THE MUSIC MY FRIENDS WERE SHOWING ME"

SAM AKPRO



SOUTH LONDON ARTIST **SAM AKPRO** HAS JOURNEYED FROM SKATEBOARDING CULTURE TO CRAFTING 'EVENFALL', HIS GENRE-DEFYING DEBUT ALBUM.

WORDS: **FELICITY NEWTON**

→ For South London's Sam Akpro, his journey from listener to creator unfolded with the same patience that now defines his debut album 'Evenfall' - a collection that stands as a testament to the power of letting creativity bloom at its own pace.

The initial path led through Kingston University's biomedical science department, though not for long. "I just went to uni because I had no other direction to go in," Akpro reflects. "But once I was there for a while, I realised that it wasn't for me. That's around the same time music and other things were interesting me." While he notes that the academic and musical realms share little common ground - "I don't think the skills overlap, the only thing I could say is you need focus for both" - this period marked a crucial turning point. The uncertainty of those university days would later inform the deliberate, measured approach he brings to his musical endeavours.

Fortune often sparks artistic revelations, and in Akpro's early twenties he forged lasting connections with other creatives. "When I was 19/20, I was lucky to be surrounded by friends who were pushing their own music, which piqued my interest in music making," he recalls. A chance encounter proved particularly pivotal. "During this time, I bumped into the singer Joy Crookes, who encouraged me to produce my own beats as opposed to using other pearled beats." That gentle nudge toward originality would become the foundation of his artistic philosophy.

London's underground culture wove itself into Akpro's musical fabric. Skateboarding, in particular, shaped his musical DNA from an early age. "It was just my main activity from the age of 11 to about 18 years old, so naturally, my musical influences came from the skate videos I was watching and the music my friends were showing me." This immersion in skateboarding culture provided more than just a soundtrack - it offered a perspective on how art and movement could work together.

The urban landscape offered additional inspiration: "Maybe graffiti,

a lot of old London graff videos had jungle, drum & bass soundtracks. I went to a few jungle raves too, but I wouldn't say that it's a direct influence musically; these were just moments in my life that stick out musically." These diverse experiences - from the raw energy of jungle raves to the visual poetry of graffiti - coalesced gradually into Akpro's distinctive musical identity.

His debut album, 'Evenfall' emerged from a three-year creative odyssey that began with a moment of artistic revelation. "It started in 2022 when I wrote the first song 'I Can't See the Sun'," Akpro explains. "It felt like I'd never written anything like that, and for that reason, I set out to write more things till I got that feeling again, so this happened on and off for three years till I had all these tunes."

The ten-track record pirouettes between post-punk intensity and jazz-laced electronic dreamscapes. While the album features some collaborative moments, Akpro maintains a clear vision of his creative process. "I wouldn't say it's inherently collaborative; all the music is written alone by me except for 'Death By Entertainment', but I'll say once I've fleshed out the idea fully, it becomes collaborative when I work with my co-producers, this helps me to get into a songwriting headspace and put down my laptop."

His partnership with ANTI- maintains the same spirit of artistic independence that marked his earlier self-released work. "It's cool; I still have all creative freedom," he notes with characteristic directness. The real hurdles came not from the label but from "trying the right things to say or maybe the way I was saying things, but to be honest, the only challenge I faced was from external opinions on what I was creating, which I learned quickly to shut down while being in the process of finishing a personal project."

Among the album's ten tracks, Akpro holds a particular fondness for 'Baka'. "The way it moves feels very organic even though it's an electronic track," he shares. "It also reminds me that you should never underestimate old ideas; I started that song four years ago." This patience speaks to his broader artistic philosophy, too. When asked about his current songwriting themes, he says: "I try not to think about what I'm writing about; just let it happen naturally."

Looking ahead, Akpro's ambitions for 'Evenfall' are clear and grounded. "I'd like it to reach as many people as possible, whether that's this year or in two years, and I'd like to play it live to as many people as possible." While the future holds more plans - "Still planning things, so I won't talk too much" - his present focus remains on the evolution of his art. Even his daily routine reflects this measured approach, as he notes simply that he'll "probably write some music later, go for a walk."

From those early days of watching skate videos and absorbing London's underground culture to crafting a debut album that is sure to be a highlight of the year, Sam Akpro exemplifies the power of patient evolution. ■



GETTING TO KNOW...

CLUTTER

BETWEEN UNIVERSITY CLASSES AND BEDROOM RECORDINGS, SWEDEN'S NEWEST INDIE HEROES ARE TURNING HAPPY ACCIDENTS INTO PURE GOLD.

→ At a Stockholm university, Clutter's Hilda Ander sits in a sunlit corridor, contemplating the band's swift transformation from bedroom recordings to indie-rock's latest compelling export. The timing feels charged with possibility — spring has finally descended on the Swedish capital, matching the band's ascending trajectory. "Things are good!" Ander enthuses. "I've got an hour to kill at university, so the timing is perfect. Seeing Emma later this evening to work on some exciting stuff. We're feeling hopeful."

That optimism is well-earned. Clutter - comprised of Ander, Emma French, Ove Jerndal, and Ville Scott - have just wrapped up a UK tour supporting Spanish garage rock darlings Hinds, an experience that left them with both professional insights and a newfound appreciation for British supermarket staples. "The meal deals were our favourite!" Ander recalls with genuine enthusiasm. "We tried a lot of different British food, but we've all been missing the meal deal sandwiches since leaving. Also really enjoyed Ribena and the Yorkie chocolate bar."

The path to those stages began in decidedly humbler circumstances. Their first recordings, including the nostalgic fuzz-bomb 'Kraut', were laid down in Jerndal's childhood bedroom back in 2022. That DIY ethos still forms the backbone of their sound - a gloriously messy collision of grunge dynamics, post-hardcore energy, and indie punk spirit that draws as much from the pages of Our Band Could Be Your Life as it does from their contemporary peers.

Their debut EP 'Loves You', out through PNKSLM Recordings, serves as both a mission statement and a time capsule. "When we started sending the songs around, we were planning to stop focusing on music. We were all starting university, and the band hadn't really gone anywhere," Ander reveals. "So then we recorded our songs and were going to release them ourselves as a kind of goodbye or a time capsule of what Clutter had been."

The recording process itself mirrors the band's evolution. "We worked on it very sporadically," Ander explains. "We recorded 'Kraut' in Ove's childhood bedroom in 2022, I think, and 'Geeks', we recorded in the fall of 2024 in an actual studio. So it really differs from song to song."

That farewell release transformed into a new beginning when labels began responding enthusiastically to the recordings. "Just a compliment made us wanna continue the band, haha," Ander says. The resulting EP spans the band's evolution, from those earliest bedroom recordings to more recent studio sessions. "It's really a time capsule of Clutter's first years, of us as teenagers. It's nostalgic and naive and honest."

Their live shows have already earned them some memorable comparisons. "Someone at a show once said our gig felt like Scott Pilgrim vs the world; that was a great compliment based solely on the live show, so that was very exciting cause we're big fans of Sex-Bob-Omb," Ander shares.

As 'Loves You' prepares to meet the world, what began as a farewell note has transformed into a thrilling opening chapter. The naive honesty of those bedroom recordings has evolved into something bigger, but no less authentic - proof that sometimes the best art comes from simply documenting who and where you are, rather than trying to be something you're not. ■ **Clutter's EP 'Loves You' is out now.**



FROM FAT WHITE FAMILY TO PREGOBLIN, SUPERGROUP OF SORTS Y ARE CRAFTING SOMETHING BEAUTIFULLY UNCONVENTIONAL.

→ Musical shape-shifters Y have burst out of Peckham with a wonderfully weird and wonky sound that sticks two fingers up to genre constraints and redefines the very concept of chaos. Their impossible-to-Google name materialised through happy accident, as vocalist/synth player Sophie Coppin recalls: "The [song] name 'Why' was coined before our band name Y. A midi keyboard voice I found sounded like it was saying 'why', so I jokingly suggested we just run with that, and the rest is history."

The five-piece outfit - Adam Brennan (guitar/vocals), Sophie Coppin (vocals/synth), Dan GB (bass), Harry McHale (saxophone), and Fells (drums) - represent a fascinating convergence of London's experimental music circles. Their collective musical heritage spans some of the capital's most compelling projects, a fact Sophie illuminates: "Adam and Fells are in Fat White Family. Adam also has his band SCUD FM and plays in Pregoblin. Fells has his band, Children of the Pope. Dan is in Meatraffle and sometimes sessions/fills in for Decius and Warmsucher. Harry has his own band, Star City. I also have a sort of solo project called Wayword. It's all very polyjamory, and there are a lot of crossovers, a lot of music being played."

"We've all known each other for years," she adds, "bumping into each other at gigs and stuff, friends in common. I think Harry and Adam actually met in the pound shop in Peckham, and Adam invited him to play in his jam band at the Windmill about 8 years ago."

This rich musical cross-pollination infuses their new EP, out now on Hideous Mink Records. The release marries Japanese jazz fusion with Italo disco rhythms and Brazilian percussion — a natural evolution for such an internationally-minded collective. As Adam notes: "When you get five people together, who all have their own different influences, it helps create something a little bit different. Fells, our drummer, is Brazilian; Dan, our bass player, is Italian; and Harry, our saxophonist, grew up in Cyprus. I guess all these different cultures help keep things fresh."

Sophie grins, "I grew up in Wandsworth, so there's that exotic influence too..."

The EP's creation showcases both necessity-driven ingenuity and raw spontaneity. Adam explains: "We've been sitting on it for a while, so it's exciting to know people can finally hear it. Sophie and I wrote the bulk of it all at home a while back. We rehearsed the songs as often as we could afford to and got all the structures really solid with the group."

Recorded in just four days at Dante Traynor's Peckham studio, the sessions prioritised capturing live energy. "We recorded as much of it live in the room together as possible," Adam reveals. "The vocals and everything were recorded in one or two takes; Everything was put down so fast. We went to town on overdubs afterwards, lots of percussion and I did a lot of guitar harmonies."

Sophie offers a clear-eyed take on their pragmatic approach: "When you're a 'new' band, unfortunately, everything is very budget-focused. We are always having to put our heads together, pull favours from friends and knock stuff out as quickly as possible to keep costs down. The experience with the EP showed me with the right people around you; you can achieve great things very quickly and without spending much dollar."

As for how their songs come together, Adam explains: "The process usually starts with Sophie summoning me to sit with her and showing me an idea that she has. I'll then take over musically with a basic bass line and start working on guitar parts. When we know we have something decent, we take it to the band and bash it out all together.

"'Why' is a largely instrumental song, which got fleshed out massively in the rehearsal room. 'Hate' is a kind of mock ballad written to Sophie's favourite chord progression. Sophie had written 'Ladies Who' as an acoustic song. I reversed-engineered it and added loads of wonky parts."

Sophie continues: "'Marianne' came about when I grew an obsession with Marianne Faithful's 'Why'd You Do It'. I had mentioned to Adam I'd love to write a song to a bassline like that one had. In response, he wrote the bass part to 'Marianne', which sounds nothing like the one I liked, but had the same reggae feel. I then wrote the lyrics surrounding the idea that Marianne had led us to this moment: an ode to her, if you will. She actually died on the same day we performed the song supporting Keg on tour, and it felt quite monumental for me. Music and lyrics are often like that, I guess - imaginary conversations with people we've never met and will never meet.

"The origins of each track were very different but the process of writing was all very similar. I feel like we would be able to write more together as a band, start to finish, if everyone wasn't so busy all the time, but the way we operate in terms of song-building does work very well. It starts at home sounding cool and ends up in the rehearsal room, once everyone's refined their parts, sounding amazing."

The Windmill in Brixton stands as both laboratory and sanctuary for Y, a relationship that runs deeper than mere venue status. Sophie's description captures its almost spiritual significance: "The Windmill is sort of like therapy. You enter a space where you feel there is no judgment. You feel like you can experiment with any kind of music and see how it feels to play live. The community there is mostly very welcoming to that. Actually, I'd say the Windmill is more like church. It's irrelevant what people spectating think; you are protected by the walls of the Windmill, and The Windmill does not discriminate; it loves all of its children."

"THE WINDMILL DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE; IT LOVES ALL OF ITS CHILDREN"

SOPHIE COPPIN

London's fertile musical ground continues to nurture new growth, as Sophie notes: "London's always been a hub for great music; it comes with the territory. Live music is so accessible. There is a venue for everyone, and people from all over the world live here, bringing in different influences. It's just the way of London to be churning out art. There is also terrible music in equal measure, which just makes the good stuff sound even better."

Her crystal ball gazing takes an unexpected - and thrilling - turn: "I personally think metal is going to make a big comeback. Myself and Adam have half-joked for years about starting a metal band called Thorskin with Pregoblin's frontman Alex Sebley at the helm. We're talking leathers, the hair, the epic guitar solos, double drum kits, podiums and smoke cannons. There was a period of time when simplicity was cool, but I think we're long overdue for a bit of drama now - bring back the flying guitarist!"

With their EP launch at the 100 Club set for 24th April, Y's trajectory points firmly upward. Adam frames their mission with characteristic warmth: "Life can be so depressing at times; music and gigs are a nice bit of escapism. We want to have some fun before the whole planet burns. We want to meet you! All of you!"

Sophie adds the perfect punctuation mark: "Well, statistically speaking, probably not all of you. At least 75%, for sure." ■ **Y's new EP 'Why' is out now.**



JENSEN MCRAE

TRADING MAIN CHARACTER SYNDROME FOR NARRATOR SYNDROME, LA'S **JENSEN MCRAE** CRAFTS DETAILED WORLDS ON 'I DON'T KNOW HOW BUT THEY FOUND ME!'.



"TRYING TO PLEASE EVERYBODY MEANS YOU PLEASE NOBODY"

JENSEN MCRAE

→ Jensen McRae's extraordinary memory doesn't just serve as a songwriting tool: it's her superpower, with the Los Angeles-based artist possessing an almost supernatural ability to transform fleeting moments into more. "I think I notice things other people don't always notice," she says. "Sometimes I startle people with how much I remember about what they've said, or when I can say definitively on what date certain events happened."

This keen eye for detail permeates 'I Don't Know How But They Found Me!', her second album arriving this spring via Dea Oceans. The record's title - borrowed from Back to the Future - mirrors McRae's own intricate dance between past and present. "A big part of my Back to the Future fandom is just nostalgia, childhood I loved the movie as a kid, and I keep going back to it over the years," she explains. "The first film in particular is such a clean narrative, a triumph of good vs. evil, a hero overcoming adversity and racing against the clock."

McRae's relationship with pop culture reflects a refreshing lack of pretence. "I've never been very good about prestige cinema. I need my literature to be rigorous and provocative and deep, but I like for my TV and film to just make me feel good."

The Los Angeles-based singer-songwriter has been racing her own clock since releasing her debut 'Are You Happy Now?' in 2022. Rather than resting on early acclaim, she immediately began laying the foundations for what would become her second full-length effort. "I never stop writing," she notes. "I've never consciously thought of myself as starting or finishing a record. But the oldest song on the album was written in April 2022, just a couple weeks after my debut came out, and the newest song on the record was 'Massachusetts', which I finished writing in December 2023."

That latest addition to the album emerged from an unexpected viral moment - a raw snippet posted online that captured listeners' imagination. Yet McRae remained steadfast in her creative vision despite the buzz. "I've been lucky enough to go viral a handful of times, and when I release full versions of those songs, I like to work without thinking about what other people expect me to do. The integrity of a song rests in my ability to remain faithful to the original seed of the idea, to express what I wanted to express from the beginning."

This unwavering commitment to artistic authenticity extends beyond individual songs to her entire creative approach. "Ultimately, trying to please everybody means you please nobody, so my goal is always just to impress myself." It's a philosophy that has served her well; while her debut involved a more contained process, her new effort expanded both collaboratively and conceptually. "With this one, it felt like we had so many more songs to choose from, and I'd worked with more writers and producers, and the track list changed all the time."

The album's recording in North Carolina with producer Brad Cook (known for work with Bon Iver and Waxahatchee) proved transformative. "I felt very free," McRae says. "Brad Cook is such a brilliant mind, and he's so down to earth. His process is highly efficient, but it still left so much room for us to experiment and get to know each other." The sessions became a family affair, with her brother Holden joining on keyboards. "Having my little brother there pushed me because I wanted to give him a learning experience as much as I wanted to give myself a great album. I encouraged him to ask questions and take leaps."

The recording process struck a delicate balance between collective creativity and personal vision. "It was so 100% collaborative; everyone's input was valued, but it never stopped feeling like my album and my story."

Music runs deep in the McRae family, though not in conventional ways. "Neither of my parents are really musical by trade, though my dad has a great voice," she explains. "Our parents stuck all three of us in piano lessons like most parents do, and while our oldest brother didn't much care for it, me and my little brother took to it pretty quickly. I learned to read really early and have always loved telling stories - songwriting became a natural extension of that."

That storytelling instinct has evolved into what McRae describes as "narrator syndrome" rather than "main character syndrome" - a perspective that shapes her distinctive lyrical approach. "I like to pay attention. I like to remember," she says. "I think my unique turns of phrase stem from my observational habits. I say things no one else says because I find beauty and value in sensations and occurrences that usually get overlooked."

Her dedication to craft extends beyond mere observation. "I write all the time, even when I don't feel inspired," she shares. "I try to deconstruct why I like the things I like. I read a lot of fiction - I think it's vital to be creatively influenced by mediums outside of the one you're using. And I keep a journal. I pay close attention to life as it happens around me."

This careful attention to detail has earned McRae opportunities to share stages with artists she once admired from afar. "Getting to open for so many of my favourite artists has definitely been a highlight," she reflects. "Corinne Bailey Rae was one of my earliest inspirations; MUNA has been my favourite band since I was 18, and watching Noah Kahan go from my social media secret to global juggernaut. It's been so special and surreal to watch them all work up close."

As the conversation winds down, McRae offers a simple yet poignant reflection that could well serve as both a personal mantra and artistic mission statement: "I'm hanging in there. I hope you are, too." It's this blend of careful observation and genuine connection that makes 'I Don't Know How But They Found Me!' feel less like a second album and more like a continuation of an ongoing conversation - one that promises to resonate far beyond 2025. ■ **Jensen McRae's album 'I Don't Know How But They Found Me!' is out 25th April.**

MCRAE



LÉA SEN

WITH HER BROTHER AS CO-PILOT AND ALICE IN WONDERLAND AS SPIRITUAL GUIDE, LÉA SEN'S DEBUT ALBUM 'LEVELS' CREATES A SURREAL SPACE WHERE MEMORY AND MUSIC COLLIDE.

WORDS: FELICITY NEWTON. PHOTO: TONJE THILESEN.

"I HAD TO GO BACK TO SCRATCH FOR EVERY SINGLE SONG"

LÉA SEN

→ In a dreamy London hotel, a French musician ascends floor by floor, each level unlocking fragments of her past like save points in an endless game. This isn't the plot of a new indie film or the latest immersive art installation – it's the conceptual framework of 'LEVELS', the extraordinary debut album from Léa Sen, where personal history transforms into a metaphysical journey through time, space, and memory.

The Paris-born, London-based artist has crafted an album that functions simultaneously as emotional excavation, surrealist adventure, and pure musical innovation. Like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole (a reference Sen echoes in her album artwork), listeners find themselves in a world where reality bends, and memories blur into dreams.

"I imagined it as a surreal hotel where each room holds a memory," Sen explains. "You move through the hotel in an elevator, going from one level to the next, and each one bringing a new emotional challenge. The journey unfolds like a video game, which is another theme: you're progressing through stages of life and self-discovery."

This isn't merely clever conceptual window dressing – it's a deeply personal account of Sen's own journey, including her bold decision to relocate from Paris to London with barely two weeks' notice and limited English skills. The album serves as both chronicle and catharsis, addressing what she describes as "my late teens and early twenties that were full of escapism – including literally moving to another country and leaving a lot behind."

As the ten tracks of 'LEVELS' progress, each one reveals new dimensions of Sen's artistry. From the experimental pop of opening track 'HOME ALONE' to the nostalgic depths of 'VIDEO GAMES', the album demonstrates remarkable range while maintaining a coherent artistic vision. Even the cinematic influences weave naturally into the narrative: "I loved writing my personal stories and merging them with movies I'd watched. For example, I reference Grand Budapest Hotel for 'Lobby Boy'. It helps me have a clear picture of the scene I'm describing."

Central to the album's creation was Sen's collaboration with her producer brother, Florian Fourlin, a partnership that evolved alongside the music itself. "He basically raised me," Sen laughs. "We are very different yet very, very similar. We love the same music and gravitate towards the same sounds and songs, but we also have very different approaches. I'm super chaotic and emotional, and he's super focused and practical."

This sibling dynamic proved essential in pushing the album beyond its initial boundaries. "He brings me clarity, guidance. He challenges me all the time, but he always gives me space when I need," Sen reflects. "It's just so much more pleasant to make music when you have someone so solid and so skilled by your side. I wouldn't have been able to make a project that sounds that great without him."

The creative process wasn't without its challenges. After initially believing the album was complete, Sen and Fourlin made the difficult decision to return to basics. "There's a point we thought the album was done and then realised it really wasn't," Sen admits. "I had to go back to scratch for every single song. I realised that if it's not good enough on acoustic guitar and vocals, then it's not good enough. Too much magic, not enough substance. That was a tough one."

This commitment to substance over style reflects Sen's broader artistic evolution. While her early EPs ('You of Now pts. 1 & 2') established her as a promising voice in London's alternative music landscape, 'LEVELS' represents a quantum leap forward. The album seamlessly blends experimental pop with touches of R&B and trip-hop, all while maintaining the intimate storytelling that makes Sen's work so compelling.

Perhaps surprisingly for a French artist, Sen works exclusively in English, a choice that dates back to her childhood. "I couldn't write anything in French to save a life," she reveals. "I started writing songs in English when I was eight and haven't looked back since. French is just for speaking to people I love."

Despite the introspective nature of her music, Sen's ambitions for where she wants the album to take her extend far beyond personal catharsis. "I want to be a better musician and artist," she declares. "I want this to push me to perform with more rawness and take more risks in my singing and playing. I want to be even more honest with every song I write. And in terms of where, literally, I want to play on the biggest stages possible. My music is great, and I want everyone to hear it."

This confidence isn't unfounded – Sen has already tasted the potential of those bigger stages. "Playing Glastonbury opened my eyes," she reflects. "Though a short appearance, I had so much fun." Now, with a headline show scheduled at St Pancras Old Church on 29th May, she's eager to share these new songs with a live audience. "Come to a show," she urges. "That's how you can truly experience this music."

'LEVELS' emerges as more than just a debut album – it's a meticulously crafted journey through the landscapes of memory, identity, and artistic growth. Like the rabbit in her album artwork, Sen understands "how memories and imagination can merge along the way, which is why have to always question your own perception."

In creating this surreal hotel of memories, Léa Sen has built a space where past and present dance together, where every floor holds new revelations, and where the elevator only goes up. The doors are about to open, and everyone's invited to check-in. ■ **Léa Sen's debut album 'LEVELS' is out 30th May. She plays St Pancras Old Church on 29th May.**

29 April	+	Brighton, UK	+	Resident
30 April	+	Kingston, UK	+	Pryzm (Disco Room) for Banquet
01 May	+	Leeds, UK	+	Belgrave Music Hall for Crash
02 May	+	Liverpool. UK	+	Baltic for Jacaranda
03 May	+	London, UK	+	Rough Trade East

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KAYLA GRACE

BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH REVELATIONS AND QUEER AWAKENING, RISING ARTIST KAYLA GRACE CRAFTS AN UNFLINCHING PORTRAIT OF EARLY ADULTHOOD.

WORDS: DAN HARRISON.



→ Kayla Grace has an energy about her that seems to buzz with anticipation – fitting for an artist on the cusp of releasing music she describes as the most personal work she's ever made. At 22, she's spent the past year crafting a follow-up to her debut EP 'Glass Child', a record that introduced listeners to her raw, confessional style. Now, she's back with 'Cats Can Surf', a seven-track offering that sees her coming to terms with early adulthood, grappling with heartache, self-discovery, and the messy terrain in between.

"I've just been at rehearsals with the band today," she says by way of greeting, sounding buoyant about what lies ahead. "Getting super excited for my headline show now! It's so unreal to hear the tracks come to life and to just play with such talented musicians." Indeed, 'Cats Can Surf' has given her a fresh opportunity to push beyond bedroom demos and stripped-back recordings. She's stepping out with a full band in tow, bringing her songs to life on stage. If her own excitement is any indication, audiences will soon discover the strength of her ambition for themselves.

That ambition took root long before she headed into a studio. She points back to a childhood shaped by a near-constant love of music, recalling the moment she picked up a guitar and realised she didn't just want to sing along to her favourite tracks — she wanted to write her own. "I've loved music since I emerged from the womb, pretty much," she laughs. "When I got bored of singing other people's songs as a child, I picked up an old guitar that was laying around in my sister's room. It was my grandma's old nylon string guitar, a bit of a rubbish guitar really, but sentimentally valuable to me. I realised I could make my own music if I just learned to play a few chords. So I just started writing really, super dramatic little songs in my bedroom."

From there, she tapped into a natural inclination toward introspection and emotional honesty. "Eventually, I found my voice as a writer and really utilised it as an emotional outlet," she explains. "I'm someone who is hyper-sensitive and emotional, and sometimes that can be so difficult to regulate and to keep up with my friends and stuff. As cliché as it sounds, music really helped me to process situations and feelings." That safe space for grappling with complex emotions became the bedrock of her sound: confessional, sometimes starkly vulnerable, but never without a sense of wit. Even at her most introspective, there's a playful sparkle that lights up her stories.

When she started plotting her path to a wider audience, she discovered it almost by accident: "It started with YouTube videos mostly," she explains. "When I was a teenager during COVID, I released some music via some distribution website. I didn't really know what I was doing, but I just took a bunch of emo-looking pictures of myself as artwork and submitted it." If the process felt off-the-cuff, it turned out to be the first in a series of steps that led her to real industry connections. "I eventually met my manager through some of those videos and really found my sound before properly releasing my first EP."

With 'Glass Child', Kayla staked out her corner of indie-pop: candid, diary-entry songwriting delivered with an assured voice that belied the painful subject matter behind it. It weaponised vulnerability in a way that made industry gatekeepers sit up straight, delivering diary-scribble confessionals wrapped in indie-pop hooks that could puncture even the most carefully constructed emotional armour. The encouraging first green shoots of streaming numbers followed, sure, but more impressive was the devotion – fans who found in Grace's unfiltered honesty a mirror for their own messy emotions.

She found herself sharing stages with like-minded truth-tellers in an ecosystem that typically prefers its feelings filtered through an Instagram preset. When she casually lists "opening for Baby Queen" and "landing the cover of Our Generation on Spotify" among her highlights, it's with the endearing nonchalance of someone who measures success in genuine connections. Grace's refusal to sand down her rough edges feels like the most radical act a pop artist can commit.

But it isn't always easy. "It's definitely a tricky ride being an artist; you're basically baring your soul for scrutiny by strangers and middle-aged men in the industry, and you could write the most heart-wrenching authentic song and not get enough views or streams and suddenly lose some self-belief," she notes, showing a certain resolve to stay true to her instincts. "I'm super stubborn about this stuff; I always take numbers and figures with a pinch of salt because I just think self-belief and authenticity are the most important parts of creating and sharing art."

That ethos runs through her new EP, 'Cats Can Surf'. Released on Manifest Music, it gathers seven distinct tracks reflecting the swirl of experiences she's navigated in the last two years. Kayla herself explains it's a collection of songs that she wrote during her transition from late teen years to early adulthood. The title-track is "a fun satirical song about unrequited/forbidden love, and about being in denial about wanting someone," she explains.

"YOU'RE BASICALLY BARING YOUR SOUL FOR SCRUTINY BY STRANGERS AND MIDDLE-AGED MEN IN THE INDUSTRY"

KAYLA GRACE

Don't be fooled by the playful title or breezy melodies, though – Grace dives headfirst into mental health struggles, complicated breakups and identity revelations with the confidence of someone twice her age. These aren't polite explorations of youth's challenges but rather unflinching dispatches from emotional frontlines. In an era where pop often defaults to either vague platitudes or calculated vulnerability, Grace's unfiltered perspective feels genuinely refreshing.

In fact, each track marks a specific emotional checkpoint. "The EP has a big variety of topics covered. For example, '99 and counting' is about my mental health journey and about choosing to live despite some previous experience with suicidal thoughts," she explains. "On the other end of the spectrum, 'Berlin' is about a problematic breakup on holiday, while 'woe is me' and 'in for the kill' are self-pity, self-sabotage anthems. I like to think there's something for everyone on this EP, with 'a leith ross song' being a love song about my queer awakening and 'til the lady sings' being a song about the painful transition from lovers to strangers. Anything that made me feel something in the past couple of years of my life has basically found its way onto the EP."

While the subject matter often runs deep, she's careful to maintain an undercurrent of brightness. "The EP is super cinematic; the producer, Barns Noble, really helped me find the perfect sound to match how dramatic I am as a person," she laughs, letting a playful tone break the gravity. "It's beautiful, and all of it started with me and my acoustic guitar. I've never been more proud of a project."

Kayla's journey from teenage acoustic strummer to fully fledged musician may still be ongoing, but she's carrying with her the conviction that honest songwriting has a way of resonating with those who need it. In a time when almost everything around us feels endlessly cynical, her stubborn faith in authenticity stands out like a bright patch of sunshine – ready to be shared, whether on a stage or at a picnic in Primrose Hill. ■

PUNCHBAG

→ PUNCHBAG arrive like a intimidatingly sharp switchblade wrapped in ribbons and tissue paper – dangerous, unexpected, and utterly unconcerned with fitting in with anyone's preconceptions. The sibling duo of Clara and Anders Bach slice through the thick fog of modern irony while maintaining the playful spirit of those who know precisely when to take things seriously – and, more importantly, when not to.

Their self-proclaimed "aggressive hopecore" emerges from the most unlikely of recording studios (a literal wardrobe), where discarded clothes and a temperamental microphone stand bear witness to the birth of something new. It's here, between the hangers and hemlines, that PUNCHBAG have been developing a sound that perfectly captures the paradox of modern existence.

Their start is a story of siblings who've "known each other for a while," they deadpan, finding their collective voice in the forced intimacy of global crisis. "It was really only because of Covid that we started working together sort of by accident," Clara explains. "I wanted to produce-up some songs I had, and Anders gave it a go, never having produced anything before, and then we just did that for years until it sounded okay."

That modest origin belies the confident swagger of their debut EP 'I'm Not Your Punchbag', arriving via Mute Records this spring. But before PUNCHBAG emerged, both siblings had already carved their own distinct musical paths. "Anders has been in a very loud post-rock band called Butch Kassidy, where he played the lapsteel and his laptop," Clara notes, while she maintained her own separate project. You might say it was only a matter of time before their creative paths met.

In PUNCHBAG's world, the roles are clear but fluid, a creative process that is thoroughly collaborative. "We both write and produce everything together," they explain. This partnership has yielded more than just music; it's become a lens through which to examine the peculiarities of the world around them.

"WE HAD NO RULES, AND WE HOPE YOU CAN HEAR THAT"

PUNCHBAG

Their evolution into PUNCHBAG is almost a reaction to making art in an age of endless scrolling and context collapse. "We like to describe it as 'Aggressive Hopecore', which feels relevant to right now. It's about 2025," Clara reflects. "We live in an irony epidemic, and everything is meme-able, but alongside that, things in the world are pretty serious, and peoples' heads are in complex places. We worry about that."

This tension between digital absurdity and genuine human emotion runs through everything PUNCHBAG create. "We think those two things can be connected, that contrast, and it sonically sounds like that too, the softness and also the toughness," Clara continues. "This music isn't about chasing the news, we are chasing what people's thoughts and emotions are because of what is going on and being able to do that also with joy and catharsis."

The resulting EP emerged from sessions split between Berlin, Whitstable and their London home base, working alongside collaborators Michelle Leonard and Dee Adam. "We recorded everything at home together, just sitting in front of a laptop for weeks, going a tad mad until it was finished," they reveal. "The main challenges are just trying to get the mic stands to fit in Clara's wardrobe where we record all the vocals."

That DIY spirit pervades the four-track collection, which they describe as "a nice big soup of subjects spanning from the tumultuous relationship you have with your phone to someone making a snide comment to you at the dinner table." Each song captures a specific moment in PUNCHBAG's evolution: "'I'm Not Your Punchbag' was the song that helped us work out our name. 'You Used To Be So Sexy' was the first ever session we did. 'Pretty Youth' was one of the first songs we made that felt like this is PUNCHBAG."

The EP functions as what they call "a phone camera peering into 21st-century life for a day," capturing the raw energy of their initial experimentation. "I think that rawness and freshness came from literally just messing around, having fun and shouting with no filter," they explain. "We had no rules, and we hope you can hear that."

The tracklisting was assembled with characteristic directness. "We wanted to be straight to the point, like BANG, here ya go, here is a lil crash course into PUNCHBAG," they explain. "We want each song to feel like they could stand alone strongly and they are all intense in different ways. It was very important that each song you could move or jump to, obviously."

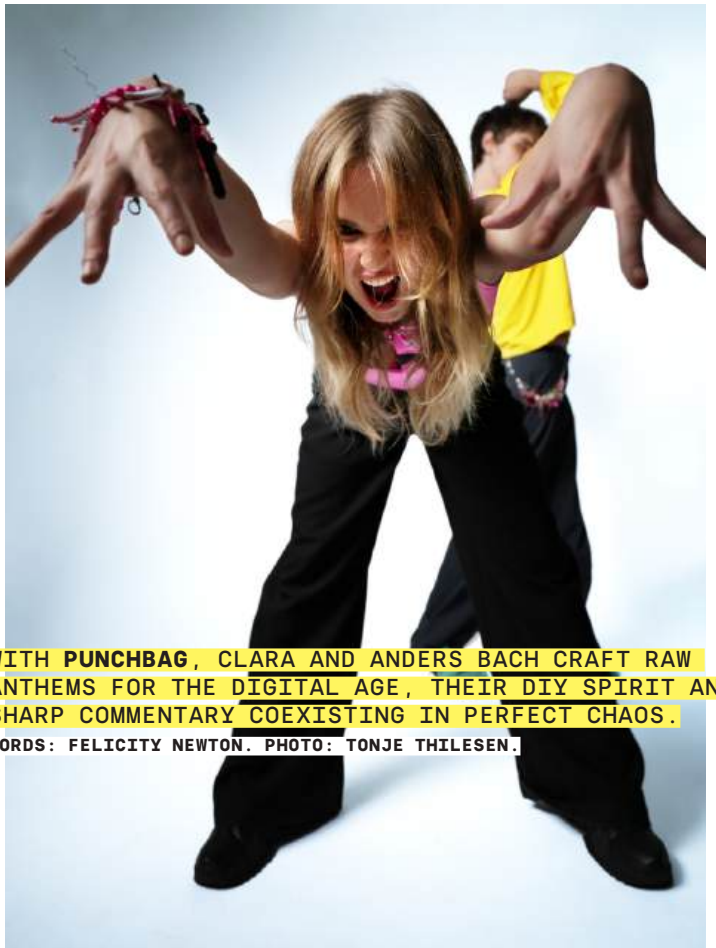
This emphasis on physical release through movement feels particularly vital in our increasingly screen-mediated world. As Clara notes, "Joy is important and jumping up and down in a sweaty room is important but I think you can do that in a non-escapist way too, without the floweriness, the petals. Although we do wear a lot of pink on stage."

Their approach to personal development mirrors their musical evolution – equal parts determination and playful absurdity. Currently, they're "working on our mind, body and soul," with Clara quite specifically "working on being able to do the splits again." This physical preparation accompanies their ongoing musical development, having "just came back from Berlin and wrote a bunch of new songs, keeping it exciting, keeping pushing our music and most importantly getting our live set to be spectacular, pyros pending."

Looking ahead, PUNCHBAG's ambitions range from the practical to the playfully absurd. When asked where they'd like the EP to take them, they respond with deadpan humour: "To the darts championship." More immediately, their 2025 calendar is filling up with promise: "Ooooof, a lot of fun things including some festivals, our first ever headline, and just more music for people to jump to or laugh to or cry to?"

Perhaps that's the greatest promise in PUNCHBAG's wardrobe-recorded missives: turning the everyday tumult of the present moment into something raw, urgent, and oddly uplifting. And if they can keep doing it with no rules, so much the better. ■

PUNCHBAG's EP 'I'm Not Your Punchbag' is out 2nd May.



WITH **PUNCHBAG**, CLARA AND ANDERS BACH CRAFT RAW ANTHEMS FOR THE DIGITAL AGE, THEIR DIY SPIRIT AND SHARP COMMENTARY COEXISTING IN PERFECT CHAOS.

WORDS: FELICITY NEWTON. PHOTO: TONJE THILESEN.

ERIN LECOUNT

WITH A BACKGROUND SPANNING ESSEX PUB GIGS AND REALITY TV, ERIN LECOUNT'S LATEST EP PROVES ELECTRONIC MUSIC CAN CAPTURE THE MESSIEST PARTS OF BEING HUMAN.

WORDS: FELICITY NEWTON. PHOTO: TONJE THILESEN.

→ Erin LeCount is crafting renaissance orchestras from plastic keyboards and computers. It's a duality captured at the heart of her new EP 'I Am Digital, I Am Divine' – a collection that explores what it means to feel simultaneously mechanical and transcendent. The juxtaposition of synthetic tools creating deeply organic, almost spiritual sounds mirrors LeCount's own artistic journey, where technology and emotion intertwine in unexpected ways.

At just 21, LeCount has already lived several musical lives. Her journey began with an innocently misunderstood Duffy cover someone broke out at a Hopton caravan park talent show. "I didn't know it was a cover, I thought she'd written it and that she was a genius," she recalls. "I started singing out the caravan windows and pissing everyone off. I realised that you could write songs and they weren't just for adults." That early spark, combined with her father's love of Daft Punk and her own appreciation for Florence + the Machine, set her on her way.

The path from caravan park performances to crafting intricate electronic compositions wasn't a straight line. By age nine, she was performing at open mics in Essex pubs, though as she notes, "I wasn't really aware though, and not really consciously thinking about putting myself 'out there'." Under the guidance of her primary school music teacher, Peter, who owned The Hermit Club in Brentwood, she immersed herself in live music every weekend. "We'd practice every Saturday in a band, learning instruments and covering songs we liked," she remembers. "I made silly amounts of money busking as a kid." These formative experiences provided an education in performance that few could match.

At twelve, she was scouted for The Voice Kids, an experience that fundamentally altered her relationship with music. "I'd never had singing lessons; I'd never really wondered or questioned if I was a good singer or not. I just did it without thinking – it was fun, it was intuitive," she explains. "Suddenly you're surrounded by kids that starred on the West End, kids younger than you that are classically trained, and you're suddenly being analysed and coached on how you sing, dissected on how you pronounce your words. I realised that it's a sport and an art."

That realisation came with a cost, but LeCount maintains a philosophical perspective: "I have opinions about it all, but I am a firm believer in sliding doors and that there's something fateful about everything you experience, so I'd never take it back." This early exposure to the industry's more clinical aspects would later inform her approach to creative authenticity.

Now, nearly a decade later, she's emerged with 'I Am Digital, I Am Divine', an EP that grapples with the complexities of human emotion through the lens of technology and spirituality. "It's about feeling inherently dysfunctional as a person, like you're a machine with a fault in your code or a piece of art, like a statue that has come to life and can feel everything in a way you're not supposed to," she explains. The collection emerged from a period of emotional hibernation and subsequent awakening. "A few years ago, I was quite unwell and dealing with a lot at once that I felt like all my emotions shut down for a good amount of time. When my life eventually started to open up again, I felt like I was a child experiencing every emotion for the first time, to its fullest extent, and that's documented in a lot of these songs."

The EP's creation process mirrors its themes, spanning from meticulously crafted compositions to raw impassioned outbursts. Take 'Marble Arch', which LeCount describes as "the longest labour of love I've ever made," contrasting sharply with 'Silver Spoon', written and recorded in a single day. "The processes couldn't fit the songs better, honestly," she reflects. "'Marble Arch' was this long agonising perfectionist process that I had a longstanding relationship with. I knew it was going to be a centrepiece and I obsessed over it. It was like chipping away at a statue or art piece; it was so fragile."

'Silver Spoon' represents the opposite end of the spectrum – "so much messier and erratic, and it was an outburst of emotion, like losing control and saying something in an argument in the heat of the moment that you can't really take back." The track's success has surprised her, though perhaps it shouldn't have. She notes, "I think it's probably quite nice for people to hear the things they can't admit to themselves or others in a song. Makes them feel like they're not bad, kind of alchemises something."

The EP also includes 'Sweet Fruit', which LeCount initially considered too personal to release. "It felt so pathetic to me; half the lyrics are 'I need someone', and that's something I've never leaned into in a song," she admits. The title-track serves as both introduction and context – "emotional, post-breakup, feeling free in a strange way, a few screws loose. It embodied the chaos."

Looking ahead, she's careful not to let recent success dictate her future direction. "I think I make good things when I'm not thinking about who's listening," she says. "Getting praise for something you make is lovely, but I'm very afraid of being redundant and safe in trying to recreate that same response over and over again." She's currently in what she describes as "a processing phase," working on "the kind of things I'd dreamt of doing but didn't think would happen for many years."

As these digital-organic hybrids prepare for their live debut, LeCount continues walking the tightrope between precision and chaos – making music that sounds like how being human feels. ■

Erin LeCount's EP 'I Am Digital, I Am Divine' is out 23rd April.



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Why'd you have to go and make

From indie discos to West End stages, **Self Esteem**'s Rebecca Lucy Taylor navigates the messy reality of becoming the artist - and person - she was meant to be.

WORDS: **MARTYN YOUNG.**
PHOTOS: **JENNIFER MCCORD.**
MAKEUP: **BYRON LONDON** USING **FENTY BEAUTY**
HAIR: **JONNY ALBUTT** USING **KEVIN MURPHY**



things so complicated?

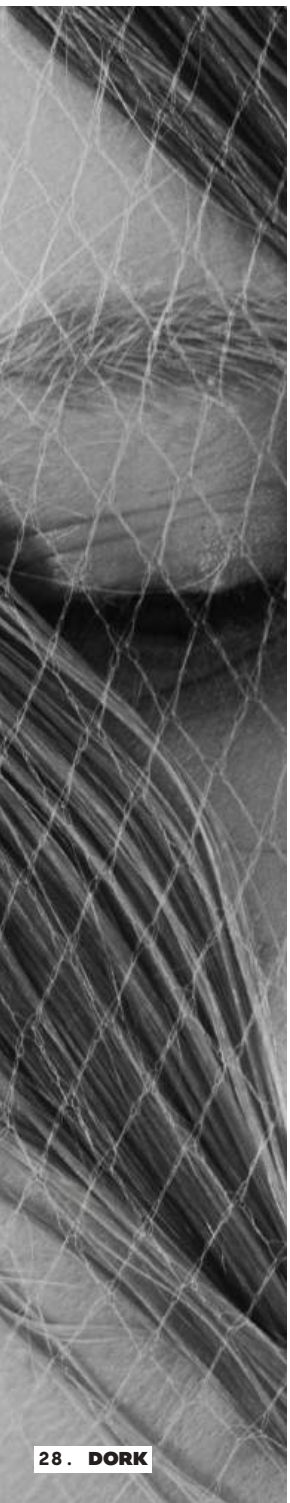
Way back in 2019, Rebecca Lucy Taylor said she envisioned her career as Self Esteem as being The People's Pop Star - a beloved national treasure as comfortable on Graham Norton's sofa as on the biggest stages in the country. Those aspirations largely materialised with her seismic second album 'Prioritise Pleasure' in 2021, but Self Esteem's journey has proven much more nuanced, messy and fractured than those early widescreen visions, culminating in her third album 'A Complicated Woman'.

"I'd love to be someone who isn't relatable, someone who is an untouchable goddess like Charli, Sabrina or Chappell, but I just can't," laughs Rebecca. "No matter how hard I try to be cool and elusive. I like the things that are funny about life and self-deprecating. I get a lot of comfort in sharing the truth about myself, but then I get wound up that I'm not as cool as Charli xcx, and I'm like, well, that's because you tell people about your wind problem. You can't have both. I'd love to be taken very, very seriously, but I also want to have a laugh."

Rebecca has certainly come a long way since starting Self Esteem. "My life is very different," she says. The rolling juggernaut of 'Prioritise Pleasure' and its impact prompted a step back from chasing ecstatic highs. "When I did [recent theatre production] Cabaret, it was the first time in so long that I had routine, and fortunately, I loved it," she smiles. "My hobbies are going to bed early and reading more books. Also, I really love washing clothes," she laughs. What follows, Dear Reader, is an exclusive pop star washing tip unavailable anywhere else. Other brands are available, but this one is officially pop star-endorsed. "There's this brand called Tallow+Ash. It's like perfume. It's just so gorgeous; I'm addicted to it."

Rebecca has been reconnecting with media that tackles the pesky notion of 'cool'. "I'm watching things that I never did," she explains. "I never watched [TV show] Girls when it came out, and no one can believe that about me. I'm finally watching Girls now, 20 years later. It's just phenomenal, fucking hell it's just so accurate to what a narcissist you are in your twenties. The clothes are so hideous. I love stuff like that and the indie sleaze Instagram account. I still get quite stressed by the idea of cool and what cool is and whether I am it, especially in my twenties with those indie discos and the way girls dressed at them. I was like fuck sake, I'll never look like that, and I'll never be that cool. You look at that account now, and you're like, oh wow, everyone looks so stupid. Trend has to move on, and it's immediately quite embarrassing."

Recognising that everything is transient and accepting conflicting desires, feelings, and emotions is central to Self Esteem's evolution. Pop music matters and life can be serious, but it can also be ridiculous, silly, confrontational and heartbreaking simultaneously. Cool and uncool in equal measure. "That's the point of the album," says Rebecca passionately. "You don't have to be one single thing all the time, life contains many different parts of ourselves. I do feel like I used to hide behind it a little bit.







"I get wound up that I'm not as cool as Charli xcx, and I'm like, well, that's because you tell people about your wind problem"

Shit goes wrong all the time when you're on stage. I've always been a bit, phhh lol haha, of course it's me. 'Prioritise Pleasure' charted at Number 11, and that's so Self Esteem. It's such a me thing to not quite be you, and I do like the idea of one day it being me, but I don't think it will be, and that's fine."

The success of 'Prioritise Pleasure' has fundamentally shaped Rebecca's last five years. "It just started to go so crazy, but it went crazy very slowly," she recalls. Everyone talks about eras in pop now, but the 'Prioritise Pleasure' era truly was a monster. It stretched on relentlessly - interview after interview, festival after festival, photoshoot after photoshoot.

"I'm realising that I really burned out," admits Rebecca. "I hate buzzy terms for things on the internet, but burnout, everything that it lists happened. What I think happened last time because it was so unassuming and we didn't think it was going to happen, you said yes. It's clunky language, but you say yes to a group of press that's good for you to do, the sort of stuff you often get, so you're hooked up with that. You're adding stuff, there's bigger opportunities coming, there's huge



opportunities coming, so you're saying yes to that but you've still got your commitments you already had. It was 6 months behind at all times doing things I didn't need to do. Not that I think any magazine is more important than any other one, but you just can't do it all, and due to the nature of how it went, I ended up doing it all, and towards the end, there was a whole new thirst from a whole different type of media that you couldn't turn down. I should have. I didn't protect myself at all. I got really poorly."

Rebecca describes touring her live show during the final year of festivals, illustrating how both creative and financial resources dwindled as demand surged. "That's why I put in so much budget and time and people into the live show this time, because that boggles my brain so much," she says wearily. "I was one person trying to make a show that had to keep evolving. The funniest thing about it, because you've still got no money you see, it looks like you're everywhere, but there's still fucking nothing to work with as you don't make any money. I had these little marble stairs made, we got some costumes and stuff and really cobbled it together, but by the end of festival season and the third year of 'Prioritise Pleasure' being out, we were on penultimate or headlining at festivals but had no time or resources to put it up a level. We were going to festivals and artists way bigger than me with more finances and huge production, and lights would be on before me, and we'd just wheel my little shitty steps on, and we'd be there in fast fashion outfits. It kind of destroyed me. I find it deeply stressful. I'm so emotional about it. I'm so attached to it. I can't switch off. I can't trust that anyone else can do it."



"It's working smarter, not harder. That's the MO this time"

This time, Rebecca plans to do things differently while maintaining her vision. "It's working smarter, not harder. That's the MO this time." As she enters the new era for 'A Complicated Woman', there are tangible benefits that enable her to fully realise the Self Esteem vision. "It's not like I'm rolling in cash now, but I'm finally able to have an idea and put it into practice," she says. "Paying talented people to come on board and help me realise my idea. That is the fucking best. I kind of think that might be why I do it. So much about it has been so lonely so there's something about being able to buy people and their time to be able to come with me and make art with me."

Many people have been on the Self Esteem journey with her from the start. Indeed, so have we - Dork did the first interview with Rebecca as Self Esteem back in 2017 when her old band Slow Club were still (barely) functioning, and she was focused on making Rihanna-style pop beats and expressing her personality fully for the first time. "I was so nervous to do that, but that really signalled that it was a thing," she says fondly, remembering that fateful chat. What followed are three albums of clever, insightful and gloriously exuberant pop. "I always saw it as a trilogy," says Rebecca. "I kind of want to say the next album won't be Self Esteem, it will be Rebecca Lucy Taylor, but I don't think anyone at a record label will let me do that. It was always sonically going to be a trilogy. It wanted to work with the same producer and use the same elements. The more access to resources I get that's the development of the idea. 'Compliments Please' was just me and Galps [long-time collaborator and multi-talented performer Sophie Galpin] singing for our lives 20 times in different places in the room, making the choir up, and 'Prioritise Pleasure' I had an 8-person singing day that made the choir, but

Special Feature

→ 'A Complicated Woman' is Self Esteem's first record featuring guest artists, each chosen by Rebecca as inspirational figures who share her values and artistic vision. Actress Julie Hesmondhalgh (aka Hayley Cropper from Coronation Street) delivers one of the album's heartstopping moments with her stirring spoken word address on 'If Not Now, It's Soon'. "You know rap music when it samples Martin Luther King speeches or famous speeches throughout history, I thought, what's my version of that?" says Rebecca. "I want to be like Julie. When I think about her life, who she is, the choices she's made and the stuff she cares about, she's just an incredible person. I had that idea for ages."

Drag Queen and cultural legend Meatball provides the intro for sex anthem '69'. "All I do is listen to Meatball's podcast," says Rebecca. "Sloppy Seconds is the only podcast that I listen to religiously. I feel very aligned with him. I wanted to see if he'd do some spoken word stuff, but during one of the podcasts, he said he doesn't like doing 69, and I thought, oh my god. My heart was racing."

Another inspiration for Rebecca was Sue Tompkins of cult indie band Life Without Buildings. "I'd love to make a whole record with her. I think she's incredible. It was supposed to be a longer-form thing. That's the annoying thing about this album - there just wasn't enough time. I hope that's the start of something with her." Nadine Shah is a pop kindred spirit for Rebecca who features on the pulverising electro of 'Lies'. "It was like love at first sight for me. We're just very similar," she says.

The most affecting moment of the album comes from South African singer-songwriter Moonchild Sanelly, who collaborated with Self Esteem on last year's single 'Big Man'. 'In Plain Sight' is a tender acoustic ballad that deals with the realities of being a woman in an increasingly hostile world. "What the fuck do you want from me? I'm saving you, you're killing me," she cries. "We wrote 'In Plain Sight' the same day as 'Big Man'," explains Rebecca. "It feels like you can't say anything as a female artist as you'd get ten times the shit that Matty Healy would get. It kills me. Because 'Prioritise Pleasure' kicked my arse so much, and I was so low, I was like, just leave it. Just fight for nothing because that's going to be easier. As I was explaining that to Moonchild we both cried, and she just stood up and said that, and it took her five minutes to write it. She just chimed with the idea of you know what, I fucking give up. I feel like female empowerment, and I'm part of that, has been come on, keep going, we deserve this, but no one's ever really talking about the other side of that, which is exhausting and shit, and it's scary. Standing up for yourself is fucking scary. I'm very proud of that song." ■



this time I thought, I'm on a major label, let's get a gospel choir. It was the same with strings. All the strings come out of my head, but I just have no musical notation or theory. I can't do any of that. I've always dreamed of being able to sing what's in my head with the strings and send that to someone who's a music boff and arranging it like a proper string arranger." 'A Complicated Woman' is the same but on a bigger scale. "I didn't want to 180," she confesses. "I was very tempted to totally change where I was going, but I knew that I couldn't because it's a bit of a cop out, I think."

The success of 'Prioritise Pleasure' meant this was the first record of Rebecca's career where there was tangible expectation. "It was an insane amount of pressure," she says. "'Prioritise Pleasure' became this weirdly cult album but still had barely any sales or streams. No one streams it! I sold quite a lot of hard copies, but no one fucking streams the thing." This is one of the peculiarities of the music industry in the 2020s - you can feel simultaneously in a whirlwind where everything and nothing is happening. Rebecca had created something people deeply loved and critically acclaimed, but it wasn't hitting those metrics while still making her in demand. It was embracing projects outside of music that allowed her to finally move on from 'Prioritise Pleasure'. That's always driven Self Esteem: What's next? "I've started the next album already now," she laughs. Rebecca took on the starring role as Sally Bowles alongside Jake Shears in the West End play Cabaret in late 2023, providing a catalyst for new creativity. "It taught me a lot, and it changed my life actually doing it. I was still writing during it but I had very little Self Esteem commitments. That became the full stop on 'Prioritise Pleasure', but I had already started on 'A Complicated Woman', and I knew what I wanted it to be." Befitting the title, the process was far from straightforward. "It wasn't pleasant," she says ruefully. "I haven't had a good time making it."

Some of that unpleasantness stems from Self Esteem's internal conflicts - between the new, universally beloved pop star and the earlier, inward-looking, self-loathing artist who had much to say but struggled to express it. Combined with the pressure to match previous success, one can understand the challenge. "I was so not alright when I was making it that it sort of happened to me," she expands. "It feels like I wrote it through gritted teeth. I wanted 5 years off, and then I would have made the perfect third album that I wanted to make, but I just couldn't do that. I knew I had to make something, and the time was now. I had a sonic vision for it, but I didn't know lyrically where it would be going. The savvy thing to have done would be to do something really poppy and crossover, not complicated and not dense. A nice 12-track album that has three big Radio 2 singles on it. I keep saying this, but because I could win The Apprentice right, there's a part of me that is like, well, do the thing that will win. That was the smart thing to do. But then the artist in my tummy and who I actually am came out. I've been very scared because I think the album is what you would expect, but it's so complicated and dense and whiplashy and I think that's quite shocking about it."

"If you aim for global megastar, you'll end up somewhere. That's been my ethos"



It's intense, but that's fitting. Life is intense, and 'A Complicated Woman' reflects that. When we spoke to Rebecca in 2021, she said she had nothing to prove to anyone, but on this record, she seems to be proving something to herself. Several tracks are scathing and vulnerable, particularly 'The Curse', which examines alcohol's soothing qualities with its choral crescendo of "I wouldn't do it if it didn't fucking work". Self Esteem has always written honest lyrics, but here, they carry a different weight that makes them particularly stark. "It reflects where I was at," explains Rebecca. "'Compliments Please' down to the title was all about me and look at me and validate me and on 'Prioritise Pleasure', I worked out nah, that's bullshit, validate yourself. The smart thing to have done on album three was a much more uplifting 'I'm alright now' album, but it's not that simple. In life, around the time I wrote 'Prioritise Pleasure', I was like, yeah, that's it, don't rely on other people for your validation, make sure you're alright, keep fucking working, be independent. I was like, ok I've solved it, that's life. And of course, it isn't. You're just at the bottom of the next complicated hill. A lot of it is self-scathing because I've reconciled with a lot of mistakes I've made, and I see it clearly. I can see why I did the things I did or felt the way I felt."

Among many striking lines is the intro to album highlight 'If Not Now It's Soon': "Everything you are, everything you see, everyone's got used to who you pretend to be" - an example of the internal questioning at the record's heart. So, if she was pretending before, what was she pretending to be? "So much of womanhood for me is about performance," she responds. "There's a Margaret Atwood quote about how we perceive ourselves through the male gaze. My complicity in the patriarchy is me realising that, and I'm very angry with myself about that. I've always been, ok, this is me; I'm being me. The more work I do on myself, though, and the calmer and more peaceful I make my life, I go, hang on a minute, that wasn't you at all. That was an idea of you. Again, I could win The Apprentice, right? It's not specific to romantic relationships, but as an example, if I meet someone, I'll become who I think they want every fucking time. I do that broadly and personally without realising."

"It's hard to try and be safe," she continues. "Everything for me is about being safe, physically safe, mentally safe, and unfortunately, it's part of being a woman that you code switch to make sure you're safe. For this album, I was thinking, imagine if you didn't have to do that and didn't have to operate



at that level every day in your brain. We have more tabs open than men do in terms of our safety. What songs would I write if I didn't feel like this? What energy would I have? Everyone pretends, and the goal is to pretend as little as possible. I see it now. I can be in rooms where I can be myself, and it's bliss, and in rooms where I don't feel like myself. After 'Prioritise Pleasure', I did so many events - red carpets, parties - and I thought I should love this, but I'd be drinking to make myself comfortable enough to be there. Then you realise you don't love this, you hate it, and the boozing is helping you cope. With a heavy heart on this album, I'm like, I don't think I like going to these things, I don't like all eyes on me, I don't like making famous friends. It all makes me nervous. I'm a lot more shy than I realised. It's weird. I'm 38 now. Things start to change, and different things become important. It's been really hard because I'm like, am I fucking loser? Am I lame now?"

A fucking loser would never make an album with moments as confrontational and wild as the punishing industrial house grooves of the electronic dance tracks that sit at the heart of the album as a counterpoint to the choral gospel beauty. "The more I make music as a solo artist, I have a system within the band where if we're doing a sexy dance move, you've got to make one thing wonky so no one can quite enjoy it," laughs Rebecca. "It's the same with music. It's salad and chips. I have to have balance. I put '69' out because I put 'Focus Is Power' out first, and it's such an uplifting, genuinely saccharine song that I thought that can't be just what comes out first. You have to know that there's this other side."

Was there ever a feeling to really cut loose and drop something as startling as '69' first? "No, not necessarily but I just didn't feel comfortable as being one thing," she answers. "That's just interesting in terms of being alive and becomes the point of the album. Expectation and the way the world wants everyone in boxes and binary, right and wrong, good and bad and in a meta way I do that in the music to make it more a full 360 experience. The album had to be complicated. I wanted you to finish the album and feel exhausted. I'm fully prepared for some male journalists to give it a review and say it's too complicated and dense with too many ideas, but that's the fucking point."

'A Complicated Woman' is a maximalist triumph from an artist unafraid to throw everything at a song to realise their vision. Nothing is off-limits. Swearing is actively encouraged. This is a very filthy album - direct and confrontational but tender and enveloping. There are rousing moments of celebratory joy like the Peggy Mitchell behind the bar at the Queen Vic address of 'Cheers To Me' taking aim at "each and every fucker that made me this way" and moments of savage scorn on 'Mother' and 'Lies', all the way to the life-affirming climax of album closer 'The Deep Blue Okay'.

The album is a triumphant statement encompassing everything Rebecca set out to do with Self Esteem, filtered through the wisdom and enlightenment she's gained through years of turmoil and self-doubt. "I wanted to get to where Slow Club had got to but by doing what I wanted to do," she says, recalling Self Esteem's earliest ambitions. "If my life was always going to be driving in a van to a 500 capacity venue in the UK I wanted that stage to be much more interesting for me to be on. That's all I set out to do. The way I did that was to work solidly all the time and the goal was to be a global megastar. If you aim for global megastar, you'll end up somewhere. That's been my ethos. Over the years, the idea of huge global fame immediately became for one thing: it's not going to happen, and then, of course, that's not what I want. The more I work with other people and get other people involved and push what you can do with a song and the story you can tell and make people feel from a song I'm just so fucking into that. I definitely wanted attention and to be in the middle with the lights on me, but obviously, that's matured and was clearly a backlash from a decade of not being the person in the middle of the stage. I was really hurt. People thought I didn't write songs in Slow Club. I still struggle now when people think I don't produce my records or write the parts."

The ambition for Self Esteem has become more nuanced, personal and complex, but that's what drives Rebecca's creative vision. "I would love to make a lot of money because that makes me feel safe. Unless you've fallen into privilege, it's a very unartistc thing to say, but the goal is to make enough money so that I don't have to be scared about my future. I just want to make dynamic, interesting projects and find other people to work with and put my ideas through. I'm excited. It feels possible. It feels like I could do an album; I could do another show. I love it when I do any of that. Radio presenting: I love doing that; I find that really fun and nicer for me emotionally. I want to do it all. What I no longer have is desire to have fame and a look at me thing about it. I think that's deeply embarrassing now."

Rebecca Lucy Taylor has reflected deeply on herself as a woman, pop star, acclaimed West End leading lady, drag aficionado, devoted Coronation Street fan and beloved British artist since starting Self Esteem. In 2017, she told Dork that Self Esteem was about "strength, love and standing up for yourself". Does that still ring true in 2025? "Yes, but I acknowledge the other side of that, and you can't do one without the other," she reflects. "I realised that from the three album titles, it's like: give me validation, I'm going to give it myself, wait a minute, it's not that simple. I'll go to my deathbed trying to find peace and calm and balance. Each album will hopefully have some further insight that I've managed to have until I'm a divine being by the end." If she doesn't quite want to be a global megastar anymore, a peaceful divine being is a worthy alternative. ■ **Self Esteem's album 'A Complicated Woman' is out 25th April.**



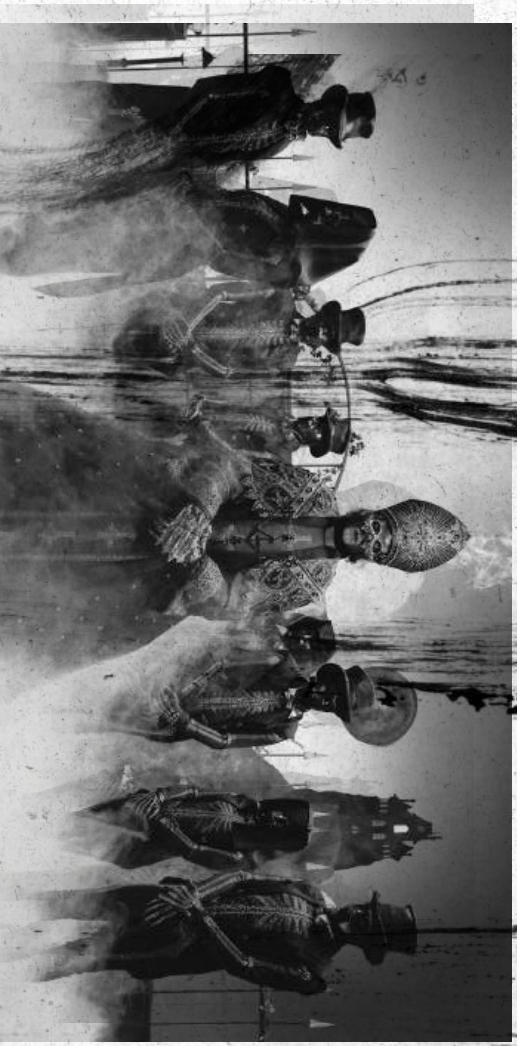
As **Ghost** prepare to unleash their most personal album yet, Tobias Forge opens up about finding hope in darkness and turning metal's theatrical menace into a festival of humanity.

WORDS: ALI SHUTLER


SHELL
TONE
CREW

GHOST

have become one of metal's biggest bands with glam arena rock anthems about death, destruction and the devil. 2018's 'Prequelle' was a bubonic concept album about plagues, and 2022's 'Impera' explored the rise and fall of empires. New album 'Skeletá' remains obsessed with death but, like great sequels, takes a more personal approach.



"It's probably some sort of midlife crisis," says Ghost's Tobias Forge. "It's also a reflection of the world and everything that's happening in it." Despite the success of 'Impera', which launched the band's first global arena tour, he had no interest in making a part two. "I don't think our fans needed an album about how poorly mentally equipped certain leaders are. We all know that already." Instead, 'Skeletá' is an album of love.

Tobias was inspired by "being alive and feeling a lot of contradicting emotions" for this open-hearted record. "It's something most of us have experienced at some point. So many songs have been written about it before, but it's something that's still compelling and baffling."

"The one thing we all need right now is hope," he continues. "It's one of the most important core aspects of life because without the promise of tomorrow and tomorrows, you're hopeless, and that's not good. People can only live in hopelessness for a limited amount of time."

Don't worry; every sickly-sweet adoring anthem is delivered through the horror-infused lens that Ghost has cultivated over the past 15 years. Lead single 'Satanized' is a song about "being consumed by the feeling of being in love." So far, so romantic. "It's also about mistaking that feeling for being possessed by a demon from another world who's eating your soul," adds Tobias. Then there's the thundering 'Missilia Amori'. "I wanted to paint a picture of how close love and hate actually are, but also the feeling of wanting to possess someone else."

And in typical Ghost fashion, there's still the ever-present threat of death across 'Skeletá', which ends with the creeping 'Excelsis' – a dreamy anthem about how we're all going to die.

"This record is about focusing on the things that unite us, and one of those is our fear of looking into eternity," he says. "I am just as unbeknownst to what is on the other side as anybody else. I know there are plenty of people who claim to know what happens [after we die], but they're either crazy or they're lying. The overall message with that song is that we already know that life will end. But if you're listening to that song, it's a clear sign that you're still alive. And once

"PEOPLE CAN ONLY LIVE IN HOPELESSNESS FOR A LIMITED AMOUNT OF TIME"

TOBIAS FORGE





"I WANTED TO PAINT A PICTURE OF HOW CLOSE LOVE AND HATE ACTUALLY ARE"

TOBIAS FORGE

you're done listening, you should continue to live and do joyous things."

Tobias cut his teeth in Sweden's DIY punk scene, exploring extreme metal as a teenager. He formed Ghost in 2006 as a way to bring his love for traditional rock bands The Doors, Pink Floyd and The Rolling Stones into the mix, as well as his fondness for musical theatre. A three-track demo was shared on MySpace in March 2010, and days later, their inbox was filled with offers from record labels. Recorded in a basement studio in his hometown of Linköping, debut album 'Opus Eponymous' was released later that year.

Their first live show was something of a disaster, though. The mysterious masked metal group were booked to open Germany's Hammer Of Doom festival, but technical issues meant their 45-minute set was cut in half, and the fans of doom bands Solitude Aeturnus and Iron Man weren't all that impressed by Ghost's pop-infused anthems and fancy dress. "The scepticism in the room was pretty evident," Ghost's now unmasked leader Tobias tells Dork, describing the gig as an "unpleasant, uphill battle". After all that online buzz, it was a harsh comedown.

However, the next day, the fledgling band flew to London for a sold-out headline show at London's Camden Underworld. "The response couldn't have been more different," says Tobias a couple of days after returning to the venue to watch Tribulation. "I don't think I've ever gone on stage and had such an overwhelming response to playing my songs," he continues. "I figured if I can move these 400 people with my music, there must be a few more out there that can appreciate it. I didn't know where this band was going to go, but it was clearly going to go somewhere."

15 years later, Ghost are now one of the biggest modern metal bands around. A chunk of their fanbase is invested in the sprawling lore that sees the band recruit a new fictional frontman each album cycle (this time out, it's Papa V Perpetua), while others are here for the steadily growing back catalogue of arena rock bangers.

Not content with playing things safe, Tobias wanted to do something different with 'Skeletá'. Every other Ghost record has instrumental segues and preludes dotted throughout but this one is ten full songs with lyrics. "It's a challenge to make 40-plus minutes of cohesive, understandable and preferably entertaining music where you have five previous records. You want it to feel like a full, 10-course meal." To do this, he allowed each song to be as long as it needed to. "I wasn't searching for hits, which has been part of the playbook on previous albums. I didn't care what the radio team would think about it; I just wanted to make a great record."

And all that singing has resulted in a far more revealing, intimate set of songs. Was Tobias, who kept his identity hidden for the first chapter of Ghost's career, nervous about taking off the mask even further? The short answer is, "Yes, of course."

"There's always been this younger metal guy in me that detects what he believes to be weakness. He's the one that worries things might be a little too meek," says Tobias. "I work against that, though, and I usually win the argument. Being able to tour also helps. "We have other songs that have bigger muscles and look more menacing, so they can shield the others. Onstage, we can build a fortress around those new songs."

Every record has had that worry of, should we really go here? Should I really say that? "This album is all about the idea of being alive and being a human being. That concept hasn't been a thematic thing before, but there have been songs on every record, even going back to the occult fever dream first album, that were meant to deal with the more humane aspects and the struggles of being a person."

Still, Tobias isn't planning on following in Kiss' footsteps and launching an "unmasked" era. "I have no desire to do anything like that. Sure, Papa Perpetua is the singer of Ghost so if I choose to be a guitar player in another band, that's two different things," he explains. "But I don't think anybody needs a stripped-down, 'Lick It Up' version of Ghost. It's completely uncalled for."

Ghost traded in sweaty basement clubs for bigger



"IF YOU WANT TO SEE THE GLASS HALF-FULL, PISS-POOR REGIMES USUALLY SPAWN A LOT OF GOOD CULTURE"

TOBIAS FORGE

venues long ago but there's still a snotty subversive attitude dancing through Ghost's arena rock. "That's a touchy subject for the metal puritans," Tobias grins. "I could make life very easy for myself and say I play very mainstream, radio-friendly soft rock but I still feel in opposition to that. There is a rebel streak there."

"I don't know if it's important to be constantly going against the grain, but I carry that tradition with me," he continues, coming from a scene where the natural way to express yourself is to make art that's designed to cause a reaction. "I make stuff that looks a certain way and does contain a lot of provocative elements, but I also go on tour and try to create this family event for people from all walks of life to come in, and feel joyous about being there. It's all a bit contradictory. It's supposed to be dangerous and cool and awful, but it's actually quite nice. It's grown into this real festival of humanity."



It's why Ghost have always been welcomed at places where metal doesn't typically get a platform. 2023's festival run saw them return to heavy haunts like Download and Grasspop but also saw them embraced at Primavera, where they performed before Halsey, Blur and New Order. As well as crossover hits 'Mary On A Cross', 'Square Hammer' and 'Call Me Little Sunshine', there was also a playful cover of Genesis' 'Jesus He Knows Me'. Released the same year, their 'Phantomime' EP saw them rework songs by Iron Maiden, The Stranglers and Tina Turner.

"We could easily play those festivals because we weren't trying to destroy the vibe of Belle & Sebastian playing on the stage next to us," says Tobias. "We've never claimed we wanted to 'bring back 80s metal'. We don't need people to look like us to enjoy what we do. We don't need you to know the complete back catalogue of [German thrash band] Kreator to understand Ghost."

The past few years have seen heavier music re-embraced by the mainstream. Olivia Rodrigo became one of the biggest pop stars in the world while taking influence from 90s alternative, and this summer, Bring Me The Horizon will headline Reading & Leeds alongside Chappell Roan, Hozier and Travis Scott. Spiritbox have appeared on the cover of Dork and Sleep Token's comeback track 'Emergence' recently crashed into the Top 20 of the UK singles chart.

"Every time we talk about something being important, it's because it's resonating with youth," explains Tobias. "There's something immediate and carnal about rock music that's incomparable to other music genres. I'm not saying it's superior but there is a primordial streak in rock that does resonate with young people. It's fun to move, it's fun to do air guitar. It just feels good. If we're approaching a more rock-present future, I couldn't be happier."

Kiss were the first band that Tobias properly fell in love with, but his obsession with rock started even earlier. "I heard Twisted Sister's 'I Wanna Rock' when I was maybe three years old. It was just rebellion. I wasn't in school, but that video was all about sticking it to whatever man there is. It was just this power grab that I couldn't resist."

Horror is also a big influence on Ghost. The oft-underrated genre is getting its dues thanks to films such as Longlegs, Nosferatu and the award-winning The Substance. "If you want to see the glass half-full, piss-poor regimes usually spawn a lot of good culture," says Tobias. "I do think it has to do with our willingness to interpret what's going on and our eagerness to hope."

'Skeletá' is driven by that same ambition. "I put in as much effort to make it as special as possible," says Tobias. "It's not a repetition of what's come before."

"Even though I've managed to reach a lot of milestones, there are always more things that you want to achieve," he says of his hopes for the record. "I am as keen to maintain momentum as any other artist. I've come to a point now where I'm about to release a sixth album and it feels like we've got some sort of relevance. That's great because sooner or later in your career, you will release something that will come across as half-assed."

One thing has changed a little on this record, though. "For the past 15 years, I've constantly worked at just looking forward." Saying yes to appearing at a festival so Ghost could come back to the same city a few months later and play a headline gig, or immediately looking at the next biggest-ever venue after selling out the current one. "It's a war of inches, and you keep doing that until you have as large an empire as possible."

It's a few weeks before Ghost kick-off another massive arena tour and despite only releasing one single from 'Skeletá', Tobias knows there's a lot of enthusiasm about the new chapter. "But who knows how many more times that will happen?" he asks, embracing the wide-eyed, open-hearted determination of his own music. "I don't want to waste my precious time thinking about what comes next. I want to cherish this now because you never know when it'll end." ■ **Ghost's album 'Skeletá' is out 25th April.**

BIRD ON THE WIRE



APR

Geordie Greep
Komedia, Bath
Friday 4 April **Sold out**

Yoshika Colwell
MOTH Club
Tuesday 8 April

RALLY at ICA
Laura Misch, Wu-Lu X Anna Poison, GB & James Massiah
ICA
Wednesday 9 April

Man/Woman/Chainsaw
Scala
Thursday 10 April

Geordie Greep
Komedia, Bath
Tuesday 15 April **Sold out**
Wednesday 16 April **Sold out**

Jessica Winter
The Divine
Tuesday 15 April **Sold out**

Black Country, New Road
Village Underground, London
Tuesday 15 April **Sold out**

Porches
Heaven
Wednesday 16 April

Jeremy Bradley Earl (Woods solo)
The Lexington
Tuesday 22 April

Sam Akpro
MOTH Club
Thursday 24 April

Squid
Roundhouse
Saturday 26 April

Fly The Nest
Rian Brazil + Tony Bontana
below Stone Nest
Tuesday 29 April

MAY

Federico Albanese
Kings Place
Wednesday 7 May

Rose City Band
The Garage
Sunday 11 May

Bria Salmena
The Lexington
Tuesday 13 May

Preoccupations
The Garage
Tuesday 13 May

Circuit des Yeux
ICA
Wednesday 14 May

The Golden Dregs
100 Club
Tuesday 20 May

Jenny Hval
Islington Assembly Hall
Wednesday 21 May

Vendredi sur Mer
XOYO
Thursday 22 May

Throwing Muses
Electric Ballroom
Tuesday 27 May

deary
MOTH Club
Tuesday 27 May

Fly The Nest
Special guests TBA
below Stone Nest
Tuesday 27 May

Lael Neale
Omeara
Wednesday 28 May

MJ Lenderman & The Wind
Marble Factory, Bristol
Thursday 29 May **Sold out**

JUN

caroline
Islington Assembly Hall
Tuesday 3 June

MJ Lenderman & The Wind
Electric Ballroom, London
Wednesday 4 June **Sold out**

Spellling
Village Underground
Wednesday 11 June

Destroyer
The Fleece, Bristol
Wednesday 11 June

Islington Assembly Hall, London
Thursday 12 June

Basia Bulat
Omeara
Tuesday 17 June

Horsegirl
Scala, London
Friday 20 June **Sold out**

Band On The Wall, Manchester
Saturday 21 June

Thekla, Bristol
Thursday 26 June

Death in Vegas
Earth Theatre
Saturday 21 June

JUL

Japanese Breakfast
O2 Academy Brixton
Thursday 3 July

AUG

@
MOTH Club
Thursday 14 August

MJ Lenderman & The Wind
Roundhouse, London
Friday 15 August

RALLY Festival
Southwark Park
Saturday 23 August

SEP

DIIV
HERE @ Outernet
Wednesday 3 September

Dutch Interior
The George Tavern
Thursday 4 September

Subterranean Festival
Southbank Centre
Saturday 20 September

Black Country, New Road
Beacon Hall, Bristol
Monday 22 September

OCT

ionnalee | iamamiwhoami
HERE @ Outernet
Monday 13 October

The Magnetic Fields
Perform 69 Love Songs
Union Chapel
Thursday 2 October **Sold out**
Friday 3 October **Sold out**
Tuesday 14 October **Sold out**
Wednesday 15 October

Black Country, New Road
O2 Academy Brixton, London
Friday 31 October

NOV

Albertine Sarges
The Lexington
Tuesday 4 November

London & Beyond
birdonthewire.net

Here is Someone.

Medieval banquets and murder ballads: Michelle Zauner sets an elaborately dark table for **Japanese Breakfast**'s most ambitious sonic gathering.

WORDS: **MARTYN YOUNG.**
PHOTOS: **JENNIFER MCCORD.**
MAKEUP: **BYRON LONDON** USING **FENTY BEAUTY**
HAIR: **JONNY ALBUTT** USING **KEVIN MURPHY**





"I've started to think of melancholy less as an emotion and more of a condition"

MICHELLE ZAUNER

Over three albums as Japanese Breakfast, Michelle Zauner has established herself as a masterful chronicler of emotions. She deals in big feelings, expansive sounds and widescreen passion. On her fourth album, 'For Melancholy Brunettes (and sad women)', Zauner delves deeper and darker into a fantastical world of heightened emotional tension and rich storytelling.

The third Japanese Breakfast album, 'Jubilee', celebrated the transcendent power of joy through sparkling, synth-filled pop songs. This time, Zauner sought something different. "I knew after a record that had a very bright colour palette both sonically and visually that I wanted to make something darker," she explains on the day of the album's release. This album arrives amid fierce anticipation as Japanese Breakfast evolves from critically acclaimed cult artist to alt-pop star, bridging underground and mainstream with ease. It's a feverish sense of anticipation not lost on Zauner as she ponders her feelings with the album freshly out in the world. "I feel crazy. It's an overwhelming feeling," she admits. "As I get older, the novelty of releasing a big thing and the excitement around it becomes more complicated."

'For Melancholy Brunettes (and sad women)' is a daring







follow-up to her mainstream breakthrough. It's knottier, denser and more ornate than her previous work. The evocative storytelling anchors the album, with understated sound supporting Zauner's imagery and character-building. It's a risk that she recognises but is happy to take. "You want everyone to like something you know not everyone is going to like. I don't want to make art that everyone likes, though," she laughs. "I knew it was going to be a record that some people were going to love and some people just wouldn't be down for."

Melancholy feels symbiotic with Zauner and Japanese Breakfast's work. "This is my innate personality," she laughs. "I felt very comfortable writing this way," she adds. What the album became, though, was slightly different from the original vision. "I wanted it to be a creepy, harder record. Songs like 'Magic Mountain', 'Mega Circuit' and 'Honey Water' were the direction I wanted to go in. I found that physically, though, my body didn't want to make 10 songs in that world, no matter how much I tried to write harder songs. They kept coming out as eerie, contemplative, melancholy songs. I realised that was the thread I had to follow and the overarching theme was this melancholic eeriness that is at the root of all these songs."

With melancholy's foreboding dread hanging like a dark cloud, Zauner explored its essence, contrasting it with the stark grief of her first two albums, 'Psychopomp' and 'Soft Sounds From Another Planet'. "I've started to think of melancholy less as an emotion and more of a condition," she explains. "I feel like grief and sadness are these violent emotions that are very physically overtaking and can encompass longing and heartbreak and jealousy and loss. With melancholy, I've come to think of it as a pensive and deep condition."

There's deep reflection throughout this album - internal contemplation and maturity from someone whose life has been shaped by trauma and a quest to understand their place in the world. "It's from this place of my life, reflecting on the passage of time and missed opportunity and feelings of unlived lives and anticipatory feeling of what will come to be," says Michelle, considering the album's core themes. "Those aren't things that are completely devastating, but they are complex. It's a complex sadness. I'm not overwhelmed and devastated about these things but there's a melancholy feeling about things that will never come to fruition or things I've missed out on. The passage of time, in general, and the fleeting nature of life is the thread of the whole record. It's people looking back on their lives and the decisions they've made and are teetering between their feelings."

> "I like that aggressive and sludgy sound. It was so fun. It feels like a snarling dog"
>
> **MICHELLE ZAUNER**

Was it punishing to write from such a vulnerable place? "No, I feel really cosy writing these songs," laughs Michelle. "It's harder to write joyous songs than songs that are about thinking deeply about the realities of life which are both beautiful and hard. That was what I naturally gravitated to." The album captures a distinct moment for Michelle, 20 years into her career as a recording artist. "I think one thing that's really helped me in completing projects is just to think of it as an archive of who I am at that time as a person and an artist," she explains. "This is what I'm interested in, what I'm thinking about and what I'm capable of. Every record could only be made at that time and who I was at that time. It's a mature and thoughtful album. These are thoughts I wouldn't have had when I was younger."

Some people believe melancholy music can be strangely uplifting - finding comfort in the sympathetic feelings of someone sharing similar emotions. Like those who play The Smiths when they want to have a good time. Sadness becomes their companion. Michelle doesn't quite accept that melancholy music makes you happy but recognises its healing qualities. "I don't think it's uplifting but it can be enlightening," she says. "I don't know if it feels good but it can help you understand. It's addressing reality. It's important and part of the spectrum of human emotions."

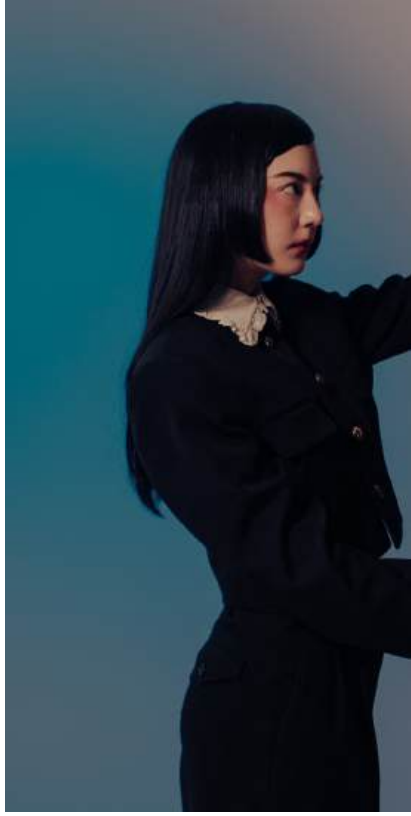
That spectrum shines through the literary and cultural influences that shaped Michelle's creation of 'For Melancholy Brunettes...'. "I feel like I've written the best songs and lyrics of my life, and that's a really good feeling," she exclaims. "I was reading a lot and was really inspired by Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain and The World Of Apples by John Cheever." Michelle also drew inspiration from visual art. "I was influenced by the paintings of the four furies and the concept of the four furies that I saw in the Prado gallery in Madrid, which are these dark paintings by Ribera that show men suffering the consequences of their actions."

These references highlight the scale of Michelle's ambition. There's









nothing throwaway here, yet the work remains welcoming. The ornate world of 'For Melancholy Brunettes...' allows her to tell twisted folk tales full of grisly details, witty wordplay and eccentric characters while weaving her own emotions into these allegorical stories. Though the album takes a different approach to the stark emotions that run through all of Japanese Breakfast's work, Michelle hints at deeper personal undercurrents. "There are two enormous life events in my personal life that I completely cannot talk about that are hugely influential on this record," she explains. "Maybe someday people will know what those two things are. They are incredibly private and difficult to talk about."

As the album unfolds, themes emerge of flawed characters grappling with internal turmoil. "I was very inspired by different stories both fictional and personal of people being seduced by some kind of temptation and succumbing to that and confronting the consequences," reveals Michelle. "You have something like 'Mega Circuit' about a generation of young men who feel politically isolated and criticised seeking refuge in an ideology that's very hateful and dangerous." A timely observation for our troubled era. "You see a father in 'Little Girl' who has prioritised his desires at the expense of a relationship with a daughter he's now mourning," she continues. "You see a woman in winter in LA who's so consumed by her own melancholy and misanthropy that she's maybe missing out on some possibilities of ease and happiness. A man in 'Orlando in Love' who's seduced very literally by a siren and dies. In 'Men In Bars', you see a man who's overcome by jealousy about his partner flirting with men in bars that he goes to shoot the man. All are stories about people overcome by an emotion that leads them to make a mistake or decision to ruin some other element of their lives."

The sparkling opening track 'Here Is Someone' introduces the album's musical and thematic elements, balancing intimacy with grand ambition. "Sonically, it felt like the right introduction," says Michelle. "It works really well as a bookend with the last song 'Magic Mountain' both of them are really personal. What a great thesis statement - life is sad, but here is someone. I think that's a really sweet, simple and big sentiment which is how I often feel about my life when I'm feeling melancholic or overwhelmed. It captures pieces of both worlds that are working sonically on the record. There are moments of really beautiful interlocking guitars but then big spikes of huge arrangements almost foreshadowing the instrumentation to come."

In terms of crafting the expansive instrumentation, Grammy award-winning producer Blake Mills, who has worked with classic rock artists - most notably Bob Dylan - helped shape the sound, with Michelle finally enjoying the comforts of recording in a proper studio. "It was the first time that I haven't been in a freezing cold warehouse in the middle of winter," she laughs. "That was a luxury. A record sounds different if you're recording in a space that's meant for recording with equipment that's really exceptional and with people who have minds and ideas. It was a new experience for me to work with



"It's a mature and thoughtful album. These are thoughts I wouldn't have had when I was younger"

MICHELLE ZAUNER







session musicians. I had never done that before. You watch them in awe, and I learned a lot."

Moving away from the previous album, there was a desire to put Michelle and her guitar front and centre. "A lot of 'Jubilee' were these really large arrangements that didn't have a lot of space for me as a guitar player. I really wanted the guitar to be a large feature. Most of the songs were going to feature me heavily on the guitar," she says. This is most evident in the enveloping epic 'Honey Water', the heaviest and most powerful moment on the album. "I wish I had more of that to give," smiles Michelle. "It's a really sexy side to me. I like that aggressive and sludgy sound. It was so fun. It feels like a snarling dog." This is the kind of song that aligns with her vision to "make a hard creepy Radiohead/Nine Inch Nails album."



Elsewhere, it's more understated. "There's a lot of depth to it and it's very subtle," describes Michelle. "I hope it's a record that people relisten to and pick up different things each time." One song with particular depth is the classic murder ballad duet 'Men In Bars' with acting legend Jeff Bridges. "I was really inspired by two big songs, which are actually my husband's favourite songs, 'Islands In The Stream' by Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers and the song Kenny Rogers covered called 'Ruby, Don't Take Your Love To Town'. It's about a man who had come home from war and has lost his legs and is begging his lover not to go to town without him, where she'd flirt with some dudes and leave him behind. I love the idea of turning that concept into a duet between a man and a woman." The song Michelle crafted tells her own stories of illicit romantic relations leading to fatal consequences. It's an example of the intimately detailed songwriting that illuminates the album as Michelle takes up the story: "They're both reflecting on the time they first met," she begins. "He has a zippo lighter and is showing off some tricks; he's a simple guy. She fell for the simple thing but now they've been in a relationship for a while and the woman is getting restless and he's maybe a little boring. The woman goes to the bar and makes some kind of flirtatious mistake and is apologising saying, let's not leave this behind, we've built this thing together. I fucked up but let's not end it over this. From his perspective, you're telling me not to break this off, but you've humiliated me, and you've wound up in the arms of men in bars, and now I'm going to take up arms at

Glasto, take two

→ One of the highlights of Japanese Breakfast's upcoming year is finally playing Glastonbury in June, after travel complications forced them to miss their 2023 slot. What many don't realise is the extraordinary effort Michelle, the band and crew made trying to make that performance happen. It's easy to assume artists simply appear on stage as if by magic, but the reality can be far more complex.

"I'm very glad that Glastonbury didn't ban us from the festival," laughs Michelle, recounting the events of June 2023. "People don't even know what we went through. We were in Luxembourg the day before. Glastonbury doesn't pay you any money. It's extremely expensive for an international band to fly 15 people abroad, hire a bus, rent amplifiers and gear, and it's a huge financial loss, and that's really challenging. The show in Luxembourg was a paid festival that was going to help us not lose our ass financially to go and play something like Glastonbury and have that experience and that exposure, which is undeniable, but with the realities and financial repercussions of that you need these anchors to help balance and offset costs.

"We had mapped out that the drive was possible if we flew out an extra bus driver and left immediately after the show, so that's what we did. The bus driver did not make the ferry we were supposed to make; we were literally gunning a drive with two drivers who we flew out to do that drive, gunned it for 24 hours and woke up at 5 o'clock in the morning to take the ferry and stand totally dishevelled on the ferry. We gunned it across the UK, and about an hour out, we were 30 minutes away from our set, and we were like, there's just no way it's going to happen. It was devastating.

"Every single member of the band and crew had a completely sleepless night trying to make everything work to get to Glastonbury, and the cards just didn't land that way. We tried to ask the festival to move our slot, but they weren't able to do it so we're very grateful to them for giving us another chance. This time, we have a day off between another festival, and we're all spending the money and flying there just in case, so we will make sure we're there. This has actually never happened to us. We're an extremely anally retentive band that is very punctual and hard-working, and we've never fucked up and missed anything like this. It was really hard. I've never seen the pure sadness of my tour manager in confronting what happened." ■

these men in bars. I thought that was a funny turn of phrase where they're both reflecting on the same events. In my mind, he's not a very emotional guy, and she's kind of skipped out on him. The one time he shows emotion is when he's been cheated on and he's now going to shoot the men in bars she's been flirting with."

It's that dark humour that runs through these fantastical gothic-tinged tales. While many are doleful and reflective, maintaining the melancholy theme, there's humour and charm too. "I really love the lyrics to 'Orlando in Love', I think they're quite funny," smiles Michelle. "A very me lyric is 'I wish you had a happier woman, one that could leave the house'. That couplet is very self-deprecating and funny and sad."

While 'Jubilee' provided a musical breakthrough for Japanese Breakfast, an even more significant breakthrough came with Michelle's first book 'Crying in H-Mart', released in 2021, which detailed her experience in the aftermath of her mother's death. 'For Melancholy Brunettes (& sad women)' was her first album written after the book, providing a welcome return to something natural and free. "After working on something so new and big like a book, which is a very long and very hard process, I was really excited to write music again because it's something I've done for so long since I was 16 years old," she says. "There are moments that are tough but it ultimately feels like the most intuitive medium for me still. It felt like a sweet homecoming to get to write music again after really struggling to write that book."

The album inhabits its own distinct universe, from the gothic medieval banquet of the album cover to the striking music videos and baroque splendour of the imagery. On the subject of food, which adorns the cover with fancy goblets and platters of meat, Michelle, as a true food aficionado, identifies the most melancholy types of food. "I think that the melancholy staples for this record are raw oysters and milky broth. Both things are deceptively simple but very complex flavours." Deceptively simple but complex aptly describes the album itself. We love a smart pop star. All of this considered imagery forms part of the world Michelle has created. "After the record was recorded, I moved to Korea for a year. I could really focus on the other aspects of a record that take a really long time, like preparing for the tour, designing the visual world. As I've become a bigger artist, it's become a bigger thing to consider. That sort of world-building is really fun for me, and it's a part of the album-making process that I've really come to enjoy."

Another example of approaching this record differently is the recent Melancholy Recital she performed to accompany the album release. A stripped-back performance full of theatricality, it was a special way to mark the occasion. "I wanted to approach it like it was a theatre performance," explains Michelle. "The nature of the record being so narrative and lyric focused and the first album that sounds really great stripped down meant I really wanted it to have a real storytelling element where I could really take my time to explore the songs and what went into them. I wanted to do something smaller for the fans. There's this misconception that I am so tortured by the success of this band, which is not the case. I'm a DIY artist. I came from a punk background where I played house shows and worked the merch table and got to talk to every person who liked my music and I sold them t-shirts myself. I used to send out merch from my house and write everyone individual letters. When you become a bigger artist, it's impossible to do that. I really miss that and feel guilty and self-conscious sometimes that I can't give what I feel is largely responsible for why I'm in the position I'm in now. It hurts me that our ticket prices are more expensive. I don't want them to be. There are now 15 people I have to provide for with that ticket fee who bring the show to life, a big production to showcase different parts of the record. I wanted to do something small that wasn't going to make any money to thank people for being our fans and showcase the album in this quiet way."

When summing up the album and its meaning, Michelle references a line from 'Paint Your Window' that encapsulates the whole process. "I think it's very fitting lyrically to say, 'Are you not afraid at every waking minute that your life could pass you by?' At the core of the record, it's people thinking about their lives through that lens, and that lens is quite a melancholic one." It's a melancholy world, and in spring 2025, there's no one better to soundtrack it than Japanese Breakfast. ■ **Japanese Breakfast's album 'For Melancholy Brunettes (and sad women)' is out now.**

"The fleeting nature of life is the thread of the whole record"

MICHELLE ZAUNER





BL LINES



"HE WAS LIKE, 'YOU'RE MY DREAM GIRL'. THEN HE TOLD ME ABOUT THE COWS..."

LOOD

On her third album ‘Bloodless’, **SAMIA** explores the power of absence, turning conspiracy theories and empty spaces into profound meditations on identity.

WORDS: **ABIGAIL FIRTH**

“The way people get obsessed with conspiracy theories sort of reminds me of the way people get obsessed with women they don’t know,” says Samia. The lead single of her third album ‘Bloodless’ hinges on this specific idea, but the record is full of similarly odd philosophies.

Bovine excision, the bizarre phenomenon and ultimately unsolved mystery of farmers in the US finding their cows dead, drained of blood, and mutilated around their mouths and genitals, was a theory brought to Samia on a date several years ago, and has stuck with her ever since.

“When this guy told me about it, he was like, ‘You’re my dream girl’. Then he told me about the cows. I found a parallel somehow,” she explains, the concept eventually serving as inspiration for both the track named after the conspiracy and the album title.

“I’d been thinking a lot about how the magnitude of what’s not there can sometimes trump what is there. I’ve been thinking about that in relationships a lot; the lack of someone can become so much bigger than they ever were because the less you give, the more people can project onto you. And that obviously pertains to unsolved mysteries. I just love the literal metaphor of there being no blood. So then, obviously, you’re thinking about the blood, and where’s the blood, you know? It becomes this enormous thing. I felt that, with womanhood in particular, the less you are, the bigger you are, in my experience.”

Of course, Samia hasn’t written a record about dead cows, but ‘Bovine Excision”s lyrics conjure up plenty more surreal images and position them against very normal ones. She sings of the allure of impossibilities, of wanting to be untouchable, and suddenly, the connection between a farmer finding their livestock mutilated in the field and a man finding his perceived dream woman on the first date doesn’t seem so far-fetched.

This train of thought echoes through ‘Bloodless’. It’s less literal and less hooky than her last album, 2023’s ‘Honey’, which leaned into her poppier, synthier side, instead creating something that looks both inward and outward. This time, Samia thinks big, wide, exploring ideologies and tying them to lifelong felt emotions of her own. Take ‘Hole In A Frame’ – named after the hole punched in Tulsa, Oklahoma’s Cain Ballroom green room wall by Sid Vicious, which has since been framed – which sprouts up from a similar seed to ‘Bovine Excision’, in that the very thing that isn’t there is the thing that draws attention; the legacy or idea of a person becomes bigger than their life. “I love that it’s literally a framed void, like the lack of the thing is what’s being celebrated,” she says.

Born in Los Angeles, Samia has been making her way around the US, living in a different state per album. She spent her teen years and early 20s in New York, where she recorded her debut album ‘The Baby’ in 2020, then moved to Nashville while making ‘Honey’, before settling in Minneapolis in December, where ‘Bloodless’ was made. It’s where her closest friends and collaborators live, all featured on this album. “I basically asked everyone in my life,” says Samia. “I was working with my friends Jake [Luppen, of Hippocampus] and Caleb [Wright, of Happy Children] who’ve done every record with me, my friend Raffaella wrote almost every song with me, and my boyfriend [Briston Maroney] played guitar on it. It felt like a big homecoming.”

During the writing period, she was getting back into Fiona Apple, who she calls the holy grail, and listening to Mitski’s ‘Be The Cowboy’, Liz Phair, and Lucinda Williams (on CD, because her car didn’t have an AUX). The country twang it has seems to be a hangover from her Nashville stint; she expresses a desire to make a country album, although she feels like she hasn’t ‘earned’ it yet (“It’s hard to be from New York making a country album”). Samia’s spent a lot of time around the globe in a less permanent sense, too, touring her own show and supporting the likes of boygenius and Maggie Rogers, noting that the latter’s fearlessness on stage is a spirit she tries to embody in her own singing.

With the themes of ‘Bloodless’ skewing more personal than ever, it was important for Samia to keep the personnel on this one close to home. “I’m pretty shy,” she says, “It takes a lot for me to open up to people, especially in the context of songwriting and music making. I can be pretty neurotic, so I like to keep it to people I really, really trust.”

The album sees her confront internal struggles in a way she hadn’t been able to before. Present throughout ‘Bloodless’ is Samia’s complex relationship with men, or the overarching ideal of Men; she describes it as similar to a worshipper’s relationship with God.

“It’s basically just about avoiding making my own decisions, but I realised shamefully that from a young age, I had developed a personality around characteristics that I believed men – this abstract conglomerate idea of men – wanted, and that felt a lot like a relationship to God. In this convoluted way, I was making decisions without having to take responsibility for them, because I was assigning the responsibility to this imaginary figure that, in my experience, represented men. I had a lot of shame about that. I didn’t want to be that kind of person. And so where I got with that on this album, I didn’t fix it, but I was able to really look it in the face, and I wrote so much about it that it helped me come to a point of acceptance with it, which the intention is to be able to move on from there.”

In the past, Samia’s expressed her frustration with being labelled a feminist artist; there’s no need to dub her music as empowering when she often feels it doesn’t come from a place of power. Still, her feminist outlook and upbringing have led her to artists who share those values, with the riot grrrl movement and specifically Kathleen Hanna influencing her on stage performance, and other quote-unquote strong women like Fiona Apple and Liz Phair influencing her lyricism and musical direction.

“Well, I think the shame around thinking about men comes from being a part of that scene, growing up and being so inspired by that. People talk about this a lot, but wanting to be a perfect feminist, I think where I got with this is, part of that is accepting and acknowledging that it’s impossible, and, you know, there’s conditioning that is sort of insurmountable.”

A middle point on the album, ‘Fair Game’, feels the most relevant to this mindset, its chorus refrain alluding to how the act of slapping a mosquito off the skin doesn’t mean it hasn’t already sucked your blood. Meanwhile, ‘Lizard’ finds religious symbolism in yoga poses and ‘Sacred’ imagines a near-lifeless body in a pool as godly. With the album often touching on perception and Samia finding herself letting the abstract opinions of men guide her, it seems obvious that decisions she’d make musically would be influenced by those factors, too. The process of creating ‘Bloodless’ was about learning to trust herself again.

“This is my little emotional journey on this one, too. It’s like coming back into my own instincts,” she explains. “I was reading a lot of Judith Butler, and they have this ideology about the self being inextricable from its social conditioning. That was really liberating to read, because I’d been trying to get back to like, what do I want, you know, in a vacuum? What do I like, separately from everyone in the world and in my life? Because there’s so much rhetoric about that. Don’t be a people pleaser, do what you want. What I found with that is it’s really hard to know what you want. You know, you can’t remove all the voices you’ve ever heard. Reading that was really helpful, and I was able to be like, you just are little pieces of everything everyone’s ever said, and everything you’ve ever done, and that’s fine.” ■ **Samia’s album ‘Bloodless’ is out 25th April.**

HEAVEN

"Hardcore is basically this church for a bunch of misfit toys," says Scowl vocalist Kat Moss. The punk subculture has a long, storied history but is in the middle of a renaissance thanks to a new generation of bands breaking with tradition and pushing into bold, brutal new places.

"Hardcore isn't just about scary, heavy music. It's a safe, effective space for community," explains Kat. Scowl's 2019 self-titled EP was driven by the buzzsaw rage and snarling breakdowns that are typical of the genre, but 2021's debut album 'How Flowers Grow' featured the pretty, melody-driven 'Seeds To Sow'. That step into the unknown was followed up with 2023's groove-heavy 'Psychic Dance Routine', with Scowl rightfully championed as one of the most exciting new hardcore bands around.

"We just happen to be the right combination of people who are not afraid of breaking the bend a little," says Kat. "For a band that's come from where we've come from, we've achieved a lot." They're not wrong, either. Scowl are the first hardcore band signed to the prestigious Dead Oceans label (Phoebe Bridgers, Shame), have toured arenas with Limp Bizkit and popped up at Coachella and Reading & Leeds. "I don't want to go into those opportunities and only take little bites," she explains. "Ambition is very much the fuel of this thing."

It's why their new album 'Are We All Angels' doesn't really sound like a hardcore record. Inspired by 90s alt-rock bands L7, Hole and Nirvana, Scowl clash polished bubblegum pop with heavy guitars across the album – and there are also nods to 00s emo bands Fall Out Boy and My Chemical Romance. Every member of the band (guitarists Malachi Greene and Mikey Bifolco, bassist Bailey Lupo, drummer Cole Gilbert) was given the freedom to bring their own influences to the project. "We were inspired by Billie Eilish, Thom Yorke and Julien Baker, but it doesn't really sound like any of those things," they grin. "It has just become this weird fucking thing."

Initially, Scowl were worried about all the blurred genre lines, but they soon came to the conclusion that they didn't care all that much about what other people might say. "Does the music feel good? Is it authentic to the emotion you're trying to expel? That's all that mattered," says Kat. "I don't care about conforming or putting in parts so we can be considered a certain type of band. Maybe it doesn't sound like a hardcore record, but like that doesn't really change anything about who we are and what we're doing. Realising that simplified a lot of the anxieties."

There is a fierce hardcore energy to 'Are We All Angels', though, which takes personal pain and twists it into shared euphoria. It's a record about control, self-belief and digging your heels in, with those messages delivered alongside plenty of venom. The lyrics are inspired by the personal grief that the band have experienced over the past few years, with that trauma amplified by the disconnect that comes with spending months on the road away from their local scene. "There was no time or space to process anything, and it really fucking sucked. I was living a daydream, but it also felt like hell," says Kat. The band poured all that hurt into 'Are We All Angels'. "We really unleashed in the studio, and it was very cathartic. I highly recommend everybody write a record about their darkest time."

Each song is incredibly personal. 'Fantasy' is about feeling alienated by hardcore, 'B.A.B.E.' is about the extreme circumstances the band puts themselves in to chase their dreams, while 'Tonight (I'm Afraid)' is about wanting to protect someone from hurt at the cost of your own physical and mental wellbeing. "The longer you avoid that voice at the back of your head, the quicker your body will stop trusting you," they explain.

Getting so vulnerable has caused a few panic attacks as the release date of 'Are We All Angels' grows closer, but in recent weeks, Kat has found peace. "The songs aren't explicit, and if you know what I'm talking about, you've probably gone through something similar," she says. "The idea of writing a record about trusting yourself and embracing your own narrative as strongly as possible, while also succumbing to grief and the fact that you do not have control over what the world and your abusers want to say about you... it does sound vague, but if you know, you know."

'Are We All Angels' goes beyond the personal as well. "I'm also pretty angry at the world and the various systems of control. I wanted to talk about it in a way that was not madly explicit, but I really hope that young femme and queer people, the more disenfranchised corners of youth, can listen to this record and know they're not alone. I hope it offers them validation but also makes them feel radicalised in who they are."

"There's a lot of pain on the record but these songs also feel so joyful," which is an important energy for Scowl to be putting out into the universe right now. "Our world is in a really bizarre, scary place right now. People are coming to power that are a lot more open about removing our rights, and I hope people are angry about that." They hope it inspires people to seek out alternative music and the communities that form around it. "I want it to result in more radicalisation, or at least rooms where people can go and express themselves in a safe, healthy way. That's what hardcore did for me when I was younger and it really did save me," says Kat. "Knowing we're going to be playing so many shows this year and will be able to offer people a space to find that joy, that feels really good. All we have is community, right?

A lot of the early excitement around Scowl came via their chaotic live shows. As well as hitting the road hard, videos filmed and shared on the Hate5six Youtube channel racked up hundreds of thousands of views, with people enthralled by the unruly mosh pits and neverending stream of stagedivers that Scowl gigs attracted. "With hardcore, there is that push and pull energy with the crowd, so we were wary [about this new record] where we didn't know what a Scowl show would look like with songs that didn't have breakdowns and two-steps," admits Kat.

After the release of 'Special' and 'Not Hell, Not Heaven', the band have already noticed a shift in the crowd. "There's now a lot of people up front, singing along and having a good time," with the mosh happening a little further back. Kat's really excited to see how it continues to evolve after the record is released.

"One of the most important things to me is freedom of movement. I love to just dance like an idiot whenever I can," says Kat, with Talking Heads their band of choice for bedroom dance parties. "I want Scowl shows to be that place where you don't have to worry about being cringe, and you don't have to worry about embarrassing yourself. Yes, the world is on fire. It's exhausting constantly having to deal with depression, and we're all experiencing this grief cycle, but nobody can take away that spark of joy." Pretty hardcore, right? ■ **Scowl's album 'Are We All Angels' is out now.**

"I HIGHLY RECOMMEND EVERYBODY WRITE A RECORD ABOUT THEIR DARKEST TIME"

KAT MOSS

CRE

LY

From chaotic mosh pits to bubblegum pop melodies, Santa Cruz rising stars **Scowl** are redefining what punk can be in 2025.

WORDS: **ALI SHUTLER** PHOTOS: **???**



ATURES

"I feel like bittersweet is our vibe," Louise Macphail – one half of indie-pop pairing Prima Queen – surmises when talking about debut album, 'The Prize'.

A follow-up to their February 'Oats (Ain't Gonna Beg)' EP, it is an exploration of human interaction. A collection of twelve songs that swirl through heartfelt acoustic folk, crunchy guitar bangers, and 1970s-esque psychedelic pop, it is a record that is as much a celebration of soulmates as it is a carefree alt-pop masterstroke.

Vulnerability is clearly at the core of the album, delving back into the spiralling emotions that come with relationship breakdowns, but equally acknowledging that, in the end, you'll probably be ok. This is where title-track 'The Prize' came from. Representing the universal contradiction of reminding a friend of their self-worth whilst subsequently ignoring your own, it acts as a place for the girls to re-centre when they don't quite feel like themselves.

"It was such a great song to record," Louise remembers, "it's a celebration of friendship and the respect and love we have for each other. I think of the newer songs as letters to our older selves; if we're ever in a fix, we can listen to them and know that we can get out of it."

Kristin McFadden – the other half of Prima Queen, obvs – nods: "It was the same with 'Oats'; it's just so boring to be sad all the time! With those songs I was thinking of Lizzo or Chappell Roan, artists that write songs to remind you to be happy in yourself. We were just like, 'We don't wanna be sad anymore!', so we thought we'd make fun of that feeling – it seems so deep in the moment, but, in reality, it's so silly."

She continues: "We had the album recorded before that song existed. We were struggling with a title and, to be honest, panicking a little bit. We knew we wanted the theme of empowerment to be at the centre of the record, so when we wrote 'The Prize' we knew it had to be the title."

'The Prize' (the album) symbolises empowerment through shared experience, through the knowledge that, to truly understand what being empowered is, you need to have been in situations that have left you feeling completely untethered from your own self.

For this reason, the duo never felt tied to the specific events of a situation, choosing instead to highlight the nuanced waves of emotion that make you feel like you're drowning, before you learn to tread water and ultimately swim back to shore, creating a record that feels intensely human in its portrayal of real-world emotion. Sure, they might exaggerate and embellish the devastation of a trip to McDonald's ('More Credit'), or place a rose-coloured tint on the first rays of a sun shining through a pint pot after a depressingly grey winter ('Sunshine Song'), but who can honestly say they haven't retrospectively added sentimentality and drama to a seemingly mundane experience when in the throes of heartbreak?

To do this once on a record would be difficult enough for most people, but Prima Queen relished the chance to drop a façade and be real with both each other and themselves. That's not to say that it's an easy process, but it's one that was made easier by their enviably close friendship with not only each other but also their super-producer and new best friend Steph Marziano – coincidentally, Louise and Kristin are on their way to meet her right after this chat.

"She's amazing," Louise gushes, "she understood our relationship and how we work together so easily, because it can be hard having two singers and songwriters. She makes the studio a safe space, which is so important when we're trying to be vulnerable and write an album like 'The Prize'."

Kristin smiles: "She courted us for a long time; it was like we were dating! We went to an Arsenal Women's football game, we spent Valentine's Day together, and we went for Sunday lunch at her and her husband's place; she's like the third member of the band.

"It was nice to have girly energy in the studio, too, watching rom-coms, doing facemasks, drinking hot chocolate; it just made it such an enjoyable experience."

Louise continues: "Recording the album was a really healing experience because the three of us would spend an hour chatting before getting started, so we had that intimacy that allowed us to get vulnerable. We're writing about experiences that maybe we'd shelved, so when we come to record, it brings it all back, and it was nice to know you were comfortable and safe in those moments."

For many people, a job is a job; you turn a laptop on, stare blankly at emails for eight hours, then go home and desperately try to think of ways to call in sick the next day. For Prima Queen, and many bands like them who musically thrive on soul-searching and revealing their deepest insecurities, it's not quite that simple.

"I think it's Maggie Rogers who said we're in 'the business of emotion', which is a really weird place to be," Kristin admits. "It's weird to be at work and talk so freely about super personal, introspective stuff; they're difficult emotions to have in a professional environment. Sometimes, you have to just go to the bathroom and re-centre. It's still really healing and cathartic; it's a good way to release emotion and sometimes get closure."

It's often the case that the best debut albums are those that both allow the listener to get a grasp on the person behind the microphone whilst also letting the band learn about themselves in a more intimate, vital way. 'The Prize' does this effortlessly, journeying through all the stages of grief in a more realistic, rollercoaster-y sense, again underlining Prima Queen's understanding that healing isn't a linear process.

'The Prize' ebbs and flows from fan-favourite 'Mexico', which documents someone deep in their pyjamas and ice cream phase of a break-up, into 'Oats (Ain't Gonna Beg)', a tale of placing your own self-worth above anybody else's. Elsewhere, 'Meryl Streep' ponders whether moving on is ever truly possible, before 'Spaceship' resigns itself to the knowledge that you're holding on for an "I love you" that's never going to arrive. The back-and-forth between hurting and healing culminates in 'More Credit', a track that acts almost as a full-circle moment.

"There's a real childlike essence to that song," Kristin reminisces, "which is where the analogy of sitting in a McDonalds ball-pit eating ice cream comes from; it's about learning and healing. There's a rock-bottom aspect to tracks like 'Mexico' and how you've been treated, but 'More Credit' is a realisation that actually, I've been that person too; I've had more love than I thought and let someone go instead of letting those feelings in."

"I love that the last line of that song is the last line of the album," Louise continues, "'I think it's better to forget than I remember' sums up the album, really. We might not give the exact situation in the right order because the truth is in what we were feeling at that time; it's about the emotion, not the person who was there at the time. I guess I'm saying that if you think one of the songs is about you, maybe it was at one point, but it's not anymore."

Whilst there may not be one key theme to 'The Prize', the idea of healing permeates through every inch of the record, something that worked its way into the idea for the video for the title-track: a trip to an ice rink which sees Louise revivify a childhood dream.

"When I grew up, I always said I wanted to be an ice-skating guitarist. In this industry, people take it upon themselves to tell you if you're successful or not, so I thought if I could have a music video where I was living that dream of being in a band and ice skating, my child-self would look at that and say 'wow, you've made it', so it was sort of giving something back to my inner child."

On the idea of success, Kristin adds: "It's so strange that people feel like they can so openly be like 'well I've never heard of you, so you can't be that good'; I'd never tell somebody they weren't successful at their job! Like, we might've just come off a headline tour, and someone can make you feel like it was nothing and you've not made it."

Louise agrees: "Yeah, I mean, obviously, it's such a privilege to make music, and we're so happy to be doing it, but the music industry is made to make you feel small so that you keep working at it. I think people don't understand that what they say affects us. It's like if you were a chiropractor, you would never say, 'Ok, but when are you going to be the best chiropractor? When are you going to win an award?'"

In spite of the external pressures, the expectations of strangers and the microaggressions that knock you back, Kristin and Louise are still as passionate and full of creativity as ever, using every lever at their disposal to create a universe that allows them to remain focussed on their end goal: to be happy and healthy. In this way, the sporty theme of their music videos feeds back into the self-fulfilling prophecy of 'The Prize'.

"I really wanted to create an album that has a whole world around it, a bit like Kacey Musgraves' latest record," Kristin states. "The idea of sports obviously fitted with 'The Prize' as a title, but it was more of a physical manifestation of the feelings we were trying to get across; it was the physical side of the emotional journey on the record. It's versatile but connecting; it's about fun, feeling powerful, feeling strong."

At that moment, Kristin gets a text from her mum: "Oh yeah, I forgot to say! My mom texted me earlier and was like, 'Just a thought, you guys should do exercise videos for your songs – a great idea, in my opinion'; we could do a collaboration with Joe Wicks, maybe." Louise giggles, "We could do an Instagram Live with Davina McCall on release day!"

The sheer delight that the pair have when talking about every part of this album is a testament to where they are as musicians and as people. Evidence of that is 'Flying Ant Day', a track which finds itself bang in the middle of the tracklist. When talking about that track, it's obvious that it symbolises that, even if this album was written about tough times, Prima Queen are now at the height of their powers.

"I think 'Flying Ant Day' is really special to me because it's a timestamp of pure happiness," Louise remembers. "It can be quite hard to sit in an emotion and just focus on that positivity, so it was nice to channel the feeling before it went sour."

For now, Louise and Kristin are more than happy to accentuate the positives – after all, they've been a long time coming – but if they look a little bit further ahead, what is it they're dreaming of?

Kristin pauses: "To be honest, I think the main goal is to have inner peace. We just want to be happy."

In many ways, that's the real prize, isn't it? ■ **Prima Queen's album 'The Prize' is out 25th April.**

"IF YOU THINK ONE OF THE SONGS IS ABOUT YOU, MAYBE IT WAS AT ONE POINT, BUT IT'S NOT ANYMORE"

LOUISE MACPHAIL



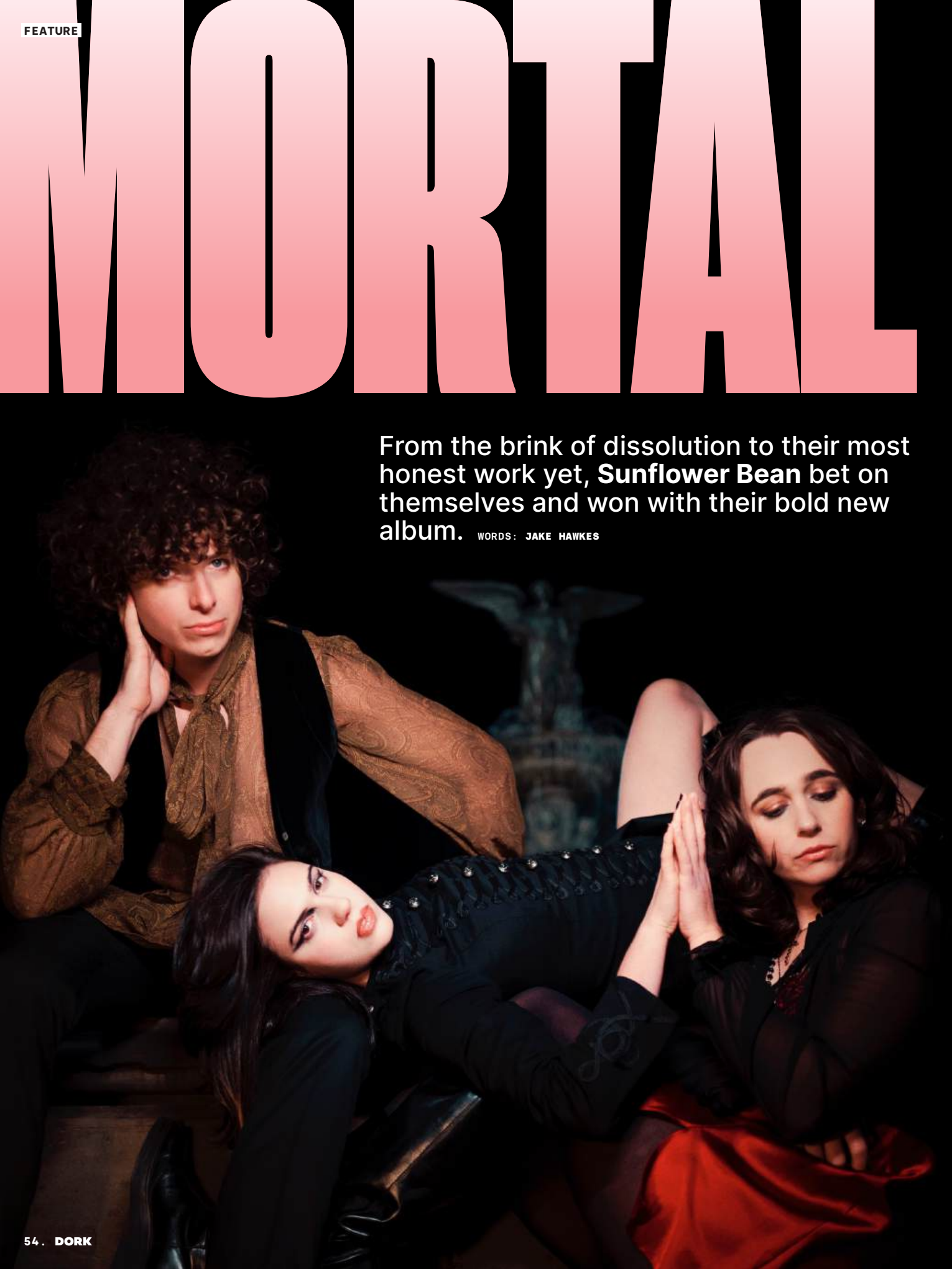
Prima Queen's debut album 'The Prize' charts an emotional odyssey where friendship becomes the ultimate victory.

WORDS: **CIARAN PICKER**



MORTAL

From the brink of dissolution to their most honest work yet, **Sunflower Bean** bet on themselves and won with their bold new album. WORDS: **JAKE HAWKES**



COMBAT

It's been almost a decade since New York's Sunflower Bean burst onto the scene with 2016's 'Human Ceremony', an exciting mix of genres and influences which sounded like exactly what it was – teenagers giddy with the thrill of creating music.

That excitement can only carry a band so far, and since then, they've evolved, always managing to be a step or two ahead of what's expected of them. From the outside, it's seemed effortless – helped along by their image as one of the coolest groups to come out of New York in quite some time. Internally, though, things weren't quite so smooth. "It definitely was not business as usual!" laughs guitarist / vocalist Nick Kivlen, dialling in with bassist / vocalist Julia Cumming from Paris, where they recently wrapped up a run of dates supporting Cage The Elephant. "The two years leading up to recording [new album] 'Mortal Primetime' were probably the most difficult we've ever had as a band. A lot of stuff happened, which was basically the stereotypes of rock'n'roll horror stories, just without the sex or the drugs or the money.

"It was all the bad things about the lifestyle and being a unit together for years; it all came to a head at once – the band was in a very broken place, and there was a handful of core supporters who really pulled us through all that confusion."

"What do they say about marriage?" interjects Julia. "'Marriage is loving the person that you've signed up to love, through all the versions of themselves that die', or something like that. Being in this band is a marriage of three people and all of us are artists, all of us are individuals, and what connects us is that we've all had the idea that what we do together is special and worth protecting.

"Along with that, there's also the natural progression of growing up. Life has brought Nick to LA, wanting to explore there, Olive [Faber, the band's drummer] has started her own project where she gets to be a front person, as well as going on her own journey. But through all of it, our manager, Krista, was never going to let us drift apart because I think she really knew that there was a lot more music we could make together if we could see that through."

The result is 'Mortal Primetime', the band's most accomplished work to date and one that more than proves their manager right. Crystallising what it is that's always made Sunflower Bean work so well, flowing between genres but remaining anchored by some of the most honest and confessional lyrics they've ever written. It's a vulnerability in part hard won by years of writing, touring, and maturing, but also from a sense that the pressure wasn't quite as intense as it had been in the past.

"BEING IN THIS BAND IS A MARRIAGE"

JULIA CUMMING

"It kind of felt like we were playing with house money when we made it, to be honest," says Nick. "Because I didn't know that it was ever going to happen. Along with that, I didn't have the skill when I was younger to fully realise what I wanted to say. I was always trying to point towards some sort of vibe or idea in an abstract or poetic way without quite knowing how to get there. Now it feels like I'm more in control and I think we all wanted to lean into thinking about how the music can reflect the meaning of the lyrics in a way that's actually super powerful. What I'm most proud of on the album is that ability to combine lyric and melody into something greater than the sum of its parts."

"I will also say," adds Julia. "As much as Nick has been catastrophising the past few years, I think the biggest gift of the pandemic and all the difficulties which came during and after is that we got so much time to write. We've written so many songs and got closer and deeper to what those songs are supposed to do. And I think we're in a time where what feels human and what feels vulnerable and what feels real is more and more previous, and it's worth fighting for. Earlier in my career, I wanted to say a lot of the things I've said on this album, but I had to shroud them, because I didn't know any other way."

Alongside lyrical confidence, the band also decided to self-record the entirety of 'Mortal Primetime', something they first did on 2024's 'Shake' EP. For a band who have always been so associated with the concept of DIY, right back to their frenetic early shows, it feels like not only a natural evolution, but something which chimes with the core of who they are. Not that all of the above makes it any easier in practice, though.

"I was spending 12 to 14 hours a day the whole month leading up to the record just obsessing over it and the fact that we were going to be self-producing," says Julia with a groan. "Even though we'd already done the EP, a whole album is such a different proposition. Our engineer was asking what mic we wanted to use or what we wanted things to sound like, and for the first few days, I was just there thinking, 'I... don't...know?' It felt like I was going to have a panic attack for the first three days of making this album."

"Then again, I was not experiencing that at all," Nick says. "I was like, 'This is going great, who cares? Throw any old mic on it, sounds good to me!'"

"Ok, so Nick's vibing, apparently, but I'm stressed," laughs Julia. "My point being, it was stressful, but then you get over it, and you make decisions, and that's how you grow. And the upshot is that when [lead single] 'Champagne Taste' came out, there was a very unexpected feeling on our side because not only are people hearing who we are as songwriters, but they're also hearing what we think is important in the mix, what mics we actually do want to be using, they're hearing more of us than they ever have on previous releases.

"Part of growing up is realising that you have as many rights as anyone else, even the people you most admire, to learn how to do these things. In the 70s and 80s, it was so expensive to get into the studio, and all the knowledge was gatekept from bands, but the way technology functions now is so different. We've always said that there's no rulebook for this, no college course you can take, and one of the most important things you can do as an artist, or a band, is to show other people that they can do it too. All of us try to do that and try to live that, and I hope that if people like this record, they'll also feel that they have the rights to learn everything and be in control of things as much as we have."

"On the last album we wanted to lean into modern production, drum loops, sampling ourselves, all of that," explains Nick. "On this album, we wanted to play together and make something that felt like a classic rock band. We have more in common with the Beatles, or The Who, or Led Zeppelin than we do with some bands and artists today."

"I want to have as much confidence for one minute as this man does!" says Julia, open-mouthed at apparently being part of a contest with the biggest bands of all time.

"I think it's undeniably true!" replies Nick. "That's not me piling pressure on – I felt no pressure making this album; it just felt like I was back from the dead and wanted to see what happened. We had the opportunity and we just needed to go in and do what we do. I was just there thinking 'I'm going to do exactly what I do when I'm recording myself at home, but there will be thousands of dollars of equipment and an engineer between me and the final output – hopefully, it will work out' and of course it did!" he says with a laugh.

"Obviously, every band is going to say: 'This is the bravest I've ever been, this is the most honest I've ever been'," adds Julia. "I can't imagine that feels unique to us, but when it comes to this record, I do think it's true. When you're younger, it feels like things might just continue the way that they are and you don't understand the preciousness of it all. But this time around, we came into thinking about how we lifted each other up musically and which depths we wanted to go.

"When I listen to 'Mortal Primetime' I feel like we're being brave. When you're younger, you never think you could be braver than you are, but as life gets deeper, I'm increasingly proud of what we're trying to stand for and the places that we're willing to go with the songs. All I can do is hope that people love what we've made as much as I do." ■ **Sunflower Bean's album 'Mortal Primetime' is out 25th April.**

THE RID

A week after the release of Lady Gaga's new album, 'Mayhem', Model/Actriz vocalist and self-proclaimed Little Monster Cole Haden is reflecting on his icon's latest offering:

"'Abracadabra' gagged me," he admits, "that was the serve I was waiting for; it was diabolical. Nothing's going to compete with 'Born This Way' for me, though. I was 15 when that came out, figuring out I was gay, and my only escapes were music and Tumblr. I need to realise that the confluence of those moments is impossible to recreate."

What might feel like an unrelated way to start a conversation instead enlightens the key themes and ideas that tie together to make Model/Actriz's second album, 'Pirouette', the follow-up to 2023's scorching industrial-rock debut, 'Dogsbody'.

Where 'Dogsbody' was a jagged, metallic embodiment of catharsis, complemented by a deliciously dysfunctional live show, 'Pirouette' is a softer-edged yet powerfully introspective selection of songs aimed at self-discovery. Designed to emphasise contrasts, to collide competing feelings about ego, identity, and definition, this second album used fear as its driving force, with Cole unravelling previously unseen parts of his soul in the name of art.

"Before [lead single] 'Cinderella' came out I was vacillating between terrified and chuffed, if that's the right word? My trepidation came from a challenge to myself to be more transparent than I'd been before. There's less need for interpretation on this record; it's more direct. Where 'Dogsbody' was most clearly revealed in the performance and obscured through lyrics, 'Pirouette' trades that for lyrics that are stark truths and literal stories. I think my feeling uncomfortable was me reaching my goal; I'm very proud of this record."

The making of 'Pirouette' took a very different form to 'Dogsbody', an album that was the culmination of seven years of existence as a band. The success of 'Dogsbody', in both fan and critic circles, set Model/Actriz on a seemingly endless cycle of global touring that created a stop-start approach to writing new tracks and a communal fatigue that, perhaps counter-intuitively, created the environment from which 'Pirouette' was born.

"It was interesting going from writing with an endless timeline to writing between tours and trying to find creative sparks when you're so tired," drummer Ruben Radlauer recalls. "We struggled for a while to get there; it took a year of soul-searching before we felt confident in what we were doing, but we managed to break through into something exciting."

Cole adds: "The experience was more grounded in the ways we were listening to our bodies and how they were responding to the deluge of chaos and the fact we were constantly moving. I remember being in a house in Nashville for a week in Fall 2023 between tour stops and we'd set the time aside to write. Out of exhaustion, we were in this flow state, and 'Vespers' suddenly came out. It was the new feeling we were looking for and kept returning to; it felt fresh."

'Pirouette' is "only half a departure" from 'Dogsbody', in Cole's words, but it nevertheless feels like the band have entered a new sonic, lyrical, and aesthetic phase. Shrouding itself in the same brooding yet bombastic atmosphere that made 'Dogsbody' such a departure from post-punk-slash-noise-rock norms, whilst also drawing on synth-pop moments to expand the borders of light and shade, it's an album that represents evolution rather than revolution. Model/Actriz aren't ripping up the rulebook and starting again; they're simply playing with expectations, both internal and external.

"WHAT CAN WE DO AS A ROCK BAND? THE BEST THING WE CAN DO IS BE LOUD, AND WE CAN MAKE ANY ROOM WE ENTER FEEL LIKE A REFUGE"

COLE HADEN

Describing the writing process, Ruben strikes to the heart of this sentiment: "'Dogsbody' felt like we were writing the last album we would ever write; it was a culmination of what we were trying to express, and so we were really precious and sensitive over it. 'Pirouette' feels like the first album of the rest of our lives. We opened up melodic and musical doors; there's optimism and more open space, and it's less claustrophobic."

He continues: "It felt like 'Dogsbody' had to be all these things because it had taken us so long to get there. 'Pirouette' gave us the chance to sit back and ask, 'Who are we?'. The answer is that we can be anyone we want to be."

The conundrum of self-understanding lies at the heart of 'Pirouette', as Cole determines the album's lyrical path through personal tales of queer awakening, inbuilt doubt and taught shame and his ultimate journey to self-acceptance. The traversal of this route isn't linear, swirling through memories of being a Disney princess-inspired five-year-old in 'Cinderella', jolting forward to an infatuation with a beautiful stranger in 'Departures', before travelling back to a re-telling of his coming out in 'Doves'. This feeling of spiralling, of being knocked off balance by a memory perhaps inadvertently unlocked, is animated by the album's title.

"'Pirouette' was in contention for the first album," Cole remembers, "but it's more suitable for this one. It embodies the dichotomy of being in and out of control, of rotating, of disorienting yourself. But, in a balletic sense, to execute that movement, you need to be strong and poised, and that was the internal journey for me on this album."

That feeling of something just out of reach carries over into the album's artwork: a bright white backdrop held in place by a black bar rail. It's an image that, for Cole, illuminates an idea of what comes next, of a step into the unknown. "The idea of a gate as a threshold, a barrier, I liked what it evoked. I think it's the closest to what heaven's gates look like, with the most important part being the light behind it; it's aspirational of a better world that you're trying to get into."

Religious imagery appears in flashes across the record, whether in the form of prayer-filled memories in 'Headlights', or in the aforementioned tale of courage and affirmation in 'Doves', feeding back into the conflict that defines the album's trajectory, this time pulling at the tension between religious ideas and growing up as a queer youth in America.

"I grew up partially in the church until I was 15. I still believe in God, I still have faith, but I don't affiliate myself with the institution anymore. It was hard to reconcile what I was discovering in myself and the attitude of the ideology that was presented as being right to me. The biggest challenge is coming out to yourself. It took me a while to believe that I could live openly as a gay person and that it wasn't something to fear."

Bearing so much of one's soul to a baying audience is always a risk, making the widespread love for lead single 'Cinderella' all the more settling for Ruben and Cole. What comes across most clearly from the pair, though, is that their assured belief in the project, and in each other more broadly, made 'Pirouette' less of a challenge and more of a chance to truthfully reflect themselves as musicians and as people.

"'Dogsbody' wasn't a risky album to make," Ruben states, "we accomplished everything we wanted to with a very specific sound, vibe, and journey. We could have easily done something cohesively similar to that, but it wouldn't have been exciting for us or anyone else."

Cole nods: "This album is broader in scope but there's nothing that's going to give you whiplash. It allows us to sit outside the pre-conceived notion of what we are."

As is to be expected from a band with such a global appeal, 'Pirouette' is heavily imbued with themes and stories picked up from their time on the road, most clearly told through 'Diva', a hedonistic twirl through time spent in Europe that sees Cole in "a scenario where I'm being my most insufferable self on a date", allowing him to once again highlight dichotomy through the philosophy of being a diva.

"Being a diva doesn't mean being a bitch," Cole explains. "It's being both human and divine, exalted and familiar. It's about being a myth, stepping into your goddess, poise; it's a very respectable and hard role to play, but I believe I have the skill to do it."

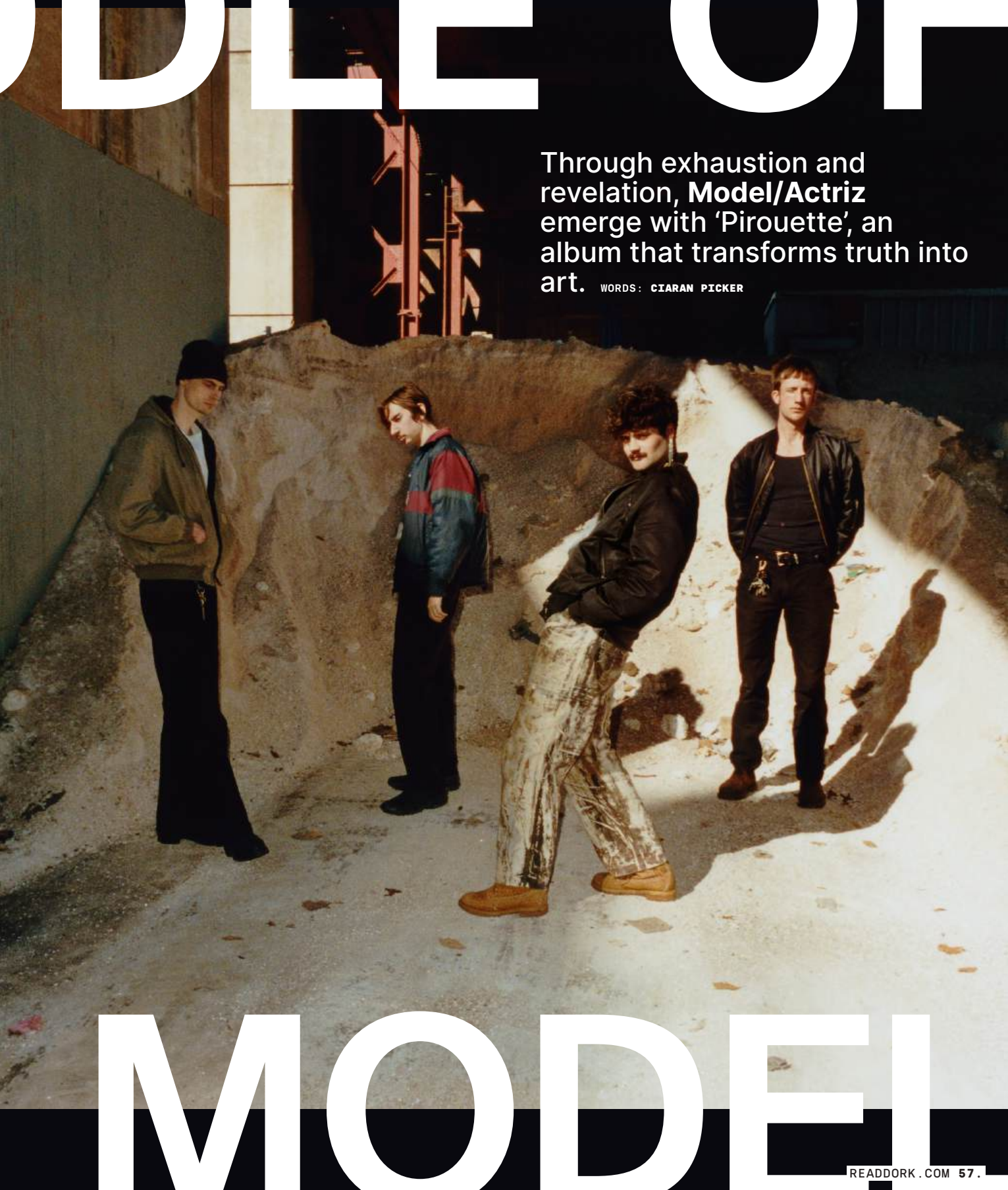
It was important for Cole to highlight the importance of divas in his story, but it equally allowed him to combine a wickedly delectable persona with the soulful longing of a life nearly lived.

"The guys in Copenhagen and Amsterdam that I sing about are real people; if they listen to the song, they'll know who they are. You have to table your personal life on the road, but there are some people who make you think about an alternative timeline where you don't have to leave, so you have to deceive yourself from knowing that you'll never see them again."

The existence of perfect timing may not be provable, although the alignment of Cole's queer realisation and Gaga's release of 'Born This Way' does carry the serendipitous feel of fateful circumstance, but it appears as if Model/Actriz have spun their way into the spotlight just when they're needed most. A physical manifestation of knife-edge living, outwardly keeping composure whilst their innermost selves toil and twist at the unpredictable pain of existence, 'Pirouette' is the road to enlightenment. ■ **Model/Actriz album 'Pirouette' is out 2nd May.**

THE

ODLE OF MODEL



Through exhaustion and revelation, **Model/Actriz** emerge with 'Pirouette', an album that transforms truth into art. WORDS: **CIARAN PICKER**

INCOMING

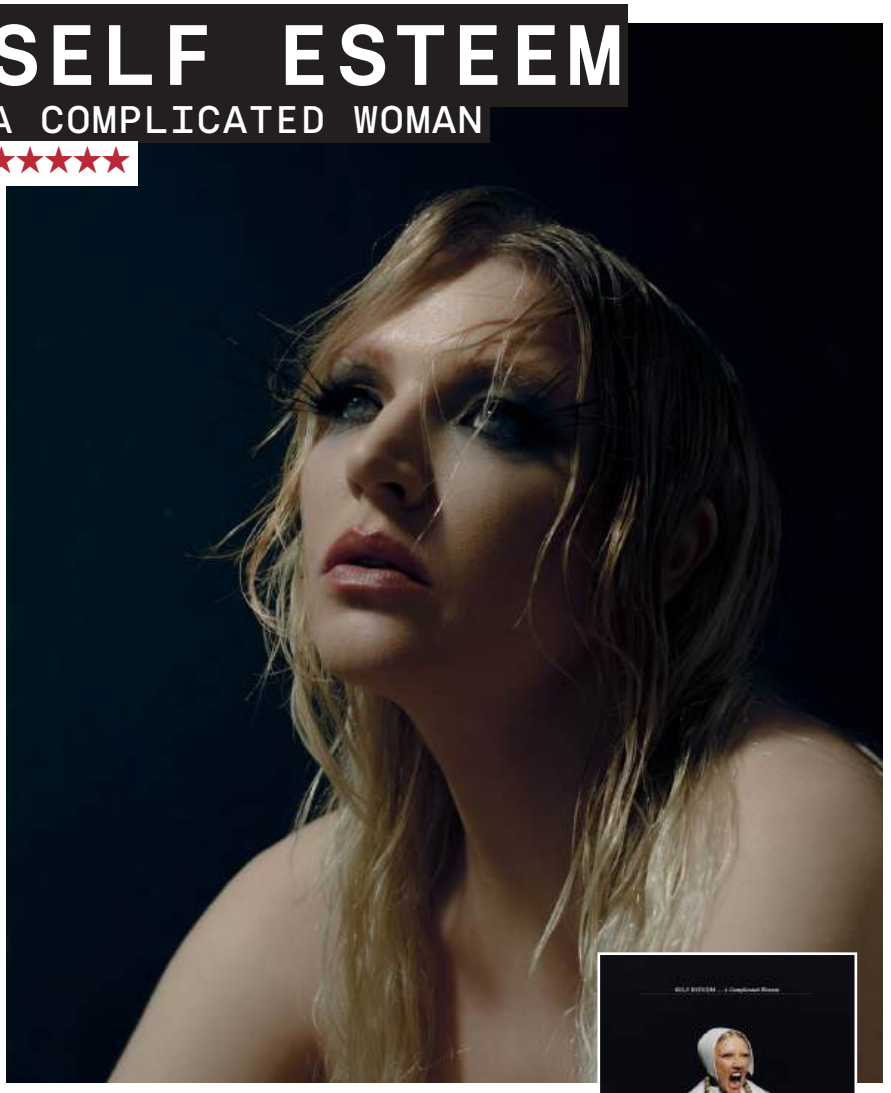
THE PLATTERS THAT MATTER.

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

SELF ESTEEM

A COMPLICATED WOMAN

★★★★★



ON HER REVELATORY THIRD ALBUM, SELF ESTEEM STRIPS AWAY PRETENSE TO ASK THE HARD QUESTIONS ABOUT MODERN EXISTENCE

→ 'A Complicated Woman' feels like a direct follow-up to 2021 sophomore sensation 'Prioritise Pleasure', as Rebecca Lucy Taylor (aka Self Esteem) finds her feet in the world after shaking off the trauma of past relationships. She places empowering war cries ('Focus is Power') next to soul-bearing moments of bleak realism ('I Do and I Don't Care') to create a landscape that is representative of what it's like to be a woman in these Orwellian times, creating a rollercoaster ride that flies through topics of sexuality, the boundaries of self, and the pressure of social contracts, told through ominous dance-pop, string quartets, and Self Esteem's searingly accurate social poetry.

There is a freedom to this record, not necessarily in a carefree way, more in a trepidatious, eyes-wide-open-to-the-tragedy-of-modern-living sort of way. Whether it's Moonchild Sanelly's cries of 'what the fuck d'you want from me?' on 'In Plain Sight', or Taylor's asking, 'if I'm looking out for you, who's looking out for me?' on 'Mother', this album is her screaming questions out to the universe and hoping for answers that haven't yet come. There is also a high-camp flick through the Karma Sutra in '69', acting as both a soon-to-be Drag Race lip sync challenge and an ode to Taylor's determination to live unburdened by expectation.

Sonically, Taylor underscores her frustrations through arena rock drums on 'Lies (ft. Nadine Shah)' and lays bare her vulnerability through soft piano and choral vocal on 'What Now', before ultimately resolving to keep putting one foot in front of the other in piano-pop anthem 'The Deep Blue Okay'.

Self Esteem shoots from the hip, strikes at the heart, and sends you on a journey to the centre of her soul. Turns out the third time really is the charm. **CIARAN PICKER**

COMING SOON

WHAT'S OUT IN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS YOU SHOULD HAVE ON YOUR RADAR.

SPORTS TEAM

BOYS THESE DAYS



→ Sports Team return with 'Boys These Days', their third album, blending sax-driven theatrics with sharp cultural commentary. Recorded in Norway with Matias Tellez, it marks their most dynamic work yet. Expect bold shifts, glossy satire, and the band's signature wit in full force.

Released 23rd May 2025

SPILL TAB

ANGIE



→ spill tab, the French-Korean-American alt-pop force, is about to drop her debut full-length album 'ANGIE'. Led by the lush title-track, the album spans genre-bending sounds from glitchy pop to sultry French grunge. Across 12 vibrant tracks, spill tab explores love, loss, and transformation for a bold, uncompromising new chapter.

Released 16th May 2025

LITTLE SIMZ

LOTUS



→ Little Simz returns this spring with 'Lotus', her sixth album. Led by explosive single 'Flood' featuring Obongjayar and Moonchild Sanelly, Simz explores renewal and transformation, showcasing her evolution as an artist. A visionary force, 'Lotus' is set to cement her legacy as one of Britain's most captivating voices.

Released 10th May 2025

BON IVER

SABLE, FABLE

★★★☆☆



→ 'SABLE, fABLE' is the fifth Bon Iver album, and it finds him in a slightly awkward but frequently very lovely middle ground between heart-stopping intimate balladry akin to his early days back in the cabin and jittery funky electro pieces. In the middle are relatively conventional but well produced FM radio pop songs like 'From', and the gloriously sunny 'Everything Is Peaceful Love'. This isn't really the album to burnish that kind of existential, mysterious dreamer factor that still gives Bon Iver such an allure; it's simply too, well, nice for that. But in a world of uncertainty and chaos, there is absolutely nothing wrong with just being nice. **MARTYN YOUNG**

PRIMA QUEEN

THE PRIZE

★★★★☆



→ You can't rush greatness: something that Louise Macphail and Kristin McFadden have, over their time as Prima Queen, come to understand. Their debut record, 'The Prize', is the result of years of mapping out exactly where they want to be. An amalgamation of tales of romantic relationships past, 'Ugly' is a turbulent retelling of what happens when you try to keep a festival romance alive, while 'Oats (I Ain't Gonna Beg)' sees the pair assert that they won't ask their partner for the bare minimum. There's even a jab at an ex named after Hollywood superstar Meryl Streep. It works delightfully well. **MINTY SLATER-MEARNS**

RACHEL CHINOURIRI

LITTLE HOUSE EP

★★★★☆



→ Remember those perfect indie-pop moments from the late-00s that made you feel like you were in a coming-of-age film? Rachel Chinouriri's 'Little House' EP captures that same magic. Opening track 'Can We Talk About Isaac?' could slip seamlessly onto the Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging soundtrack between Mumm-Ra and Lily Allen with its euphoric, guitar-driven optimism. Following the heavy emotional lifting of her debut 'What A Devastating Turn Of Events', this EP feels like stepping out of the darkness and into warm sunshine. **FELICITY NEWTON**

JENSEN MCRAE

I DON'T KNOW HOW BUT THEY FOUND ME!

★★★★☆



→ Los Angeles-based singer-songwriter Jensen McRae masterfully balances nostalgic warmth with sharp contemporary observations, and with 'I Don't Know How But They Found Me!', she delivers a record that's both timeless and perfectly timed. From the first notes of 'The Rearranger', she proves herself a storyteller who can turn a microscope on the minutiae of daily life until they become epic in scope. Her voice - equal parts velvet and vulnerability - weaves through the pristine production with remarkable precision. She's mastered the art of turning personal history into shared experience for an album that feels like it somehow knows exactly what you're going through, even when you don't quite know yourself. **FELICITY NEWTON**



BLONDSHELL

IF YOU ASKED FOR A PICTURE

★★★★★



→ When Blondshell released her self-titled debut in 2023, it declared the arrival of a catalytic new voice on the indie scene - one unafraid to lay bare tough truths, even at her own expense. On 'If You Asked For A Picture', Sabrina Teitelbaum picks up right where she left off but gears up for a more generously textured emotional and sonic journey: a fear of love without conditions, the lingering effects of familial trauma, and an inability to give up control paint in the monochrome canvas of her sharp discography.

The opening noodling of 'Thumbtack' returns us to the familiar strife of an uneasy relationship, but there is a self-reckoning that signals a thematic shift. Musically, the track evolves beyond initial expectation—delicate noodling builds into plodding rhythms, understated bass lines, and a hook that merges indie cool with a subtle country twang, creating a broader landscape that doesn't quiet back down.

Blondshell's signature bite remains sharp as she continues to embrace traditionally masculine influences - 'T&A' thrashes through its pleading chorus, 'Change' drips with sarcastic defiance, and 'He Wants Me' is driven by its pounding drums - but alongside this grit, her singer-songwriter instincts bloom like a flower through concrete. The aching vulnerability of 'Two Times', the raw teenage emotions grounding 'Event of a Fire', and the quiet acceptance of unfinished endings on closer 'Model Rocket' showcase a newfound willingness to lean into softness and set aside her biting attitude. This balance between razor-edged wit and unguarded honesty is what gives 'If You Asked For A Picture' its uniquely compelling spirit.

As an artist, Blondshell hasn't moved on from her late foray into indie; she's just continued to grow with her evolving tastes and level up on her own terms. By mining each relationship for hard-won lessons, expanding her lyrical and sonic reach, and embracing the full spectrum of her artistry, Teitelbaum cements herself as more than just an indie darling. She's a singer-songwriter powerhouse in the making. **FINLAY HOLDEN**

SUPERHEAVEN

SUPERHEAVEN

★★★★☆

→ The band's first full-length LP in a decade following a long-endured hiatus, 'Superheaven' opens with a supersonic dreamscape as 'Humans for Toys" dark lyrics and droning distortion catapult listeners back into the band's gloomy headspace. There is a deft 90s influence throughout, with this record sonically encapsulating the decade in all its grungy glory. It's an atmospheric album full of late-night angst; a stellar return to the scene. **KELSEY MCCLURE**

MAYDAY PARADE

SWEET

★★★★☆



→ Despite being veterans of pop-punk, Mayday Parade's return with 'Sweet' has all the ambition and youthful energy of a band just cutting their teeth. As anthemic as ever, vibrant but not overly polished, the first half feels nostalgic for the songs which propelled them onto the scene. 'Natural' marks something a sonic shift, a nod to a more contemporary sound, slick with a poppier shine, while the closer 'Pretty Good to Feel Something' neatly wraps up the first of this three-part release as a tune which stands proudly with one foot in the past and one foot looking forward. **ALEXANDER BRADLEY**

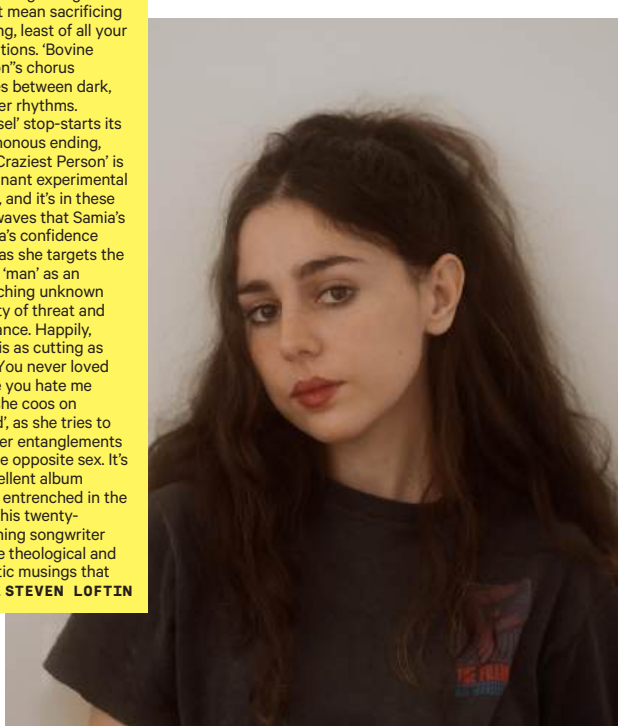
SAMIA

BLOODLESS

★★★★★



→ It's been five years since Samia's debut. 'The Baby' introduced her diaristic tunings rife with granular detail and an abundance of dry wit, soundtracked by a potent concoction of indie-folk. 2023's 'Honey' doubled down on this formula while welcoming a more polished pop sound. But, on her third outing, 'Bloodless', Samia is splitting the difference and proving that growth doesn't mean sacrificing anything, least of all your foundations. 'Bovine Excision"s chorus rumbles between dark, off-kilter rhythms. 'Carousel' stop-starts its cacophonous ending, while 'Craziest Person' is a dissonant experimental sketch, and it's in these noisy waves that Samia's new era's confidence grows as she targets the idea of 'man' as an overarching unknown quantity of threat and annoyance. Happily, Samia is as cutting as ever. "You never loved me like you hate me now," she coos on 'Sacred', as she tries to decipher entanglements with the opposite sex. It's an excellent album deeply entrenched in the life of this twenty-something songwriter and the theological and romantic musings that entails. **STEVEN LOFTIN**



SEXTILE

YES, PLEASE.

★★★☆☆



→ Sextile's 'yes, please.' bursts forth with all the subtlety of a warehouse rave - which is to say, none whatsoever. The LA duo are riding the current wave of indie-sleaze resurgence while carving their own niche in the crowded dance-punk revival landscape. 'Women Respond to Bass' does exactly as advertised, delivering a club thumper that wouldn't feel out of place sandwiched between CSS and M.I.A. in a 2006 DJ set - there's proper heart beating beneath the strobes. Like the best nights out, it's a bit rough around the edges, utterly exhilarating, and leaves you checking your phone for the next event. **HARRY SHAW**

DBA!

SKIP! WORRIED EP

★★★★☆



→ DBA! have delivered a debut EP that's both wonderfully unhinged and cleverly calculated: 'skip! worried' packs five tracks of guitar-fuelled urgency that dance right on the edge of combustion. 'sinkorswim' kicks things off with the gleeful abandon of FIDLAR's best moments. 'Whisky' follows, nodding respectfully to Blur's 'Beetlebum' before carving its own path. This is the sound of a band discovering their superpowers, and watching them flex these newfound muscles is properly exciting. 'skip! worried' introduces DBA! as a group with genuine heart and the musical muscle to back it up. **HARRY SHAW**

THE PALE WHITE

THE BIG SAD

★★★★☆



→ From the first moments of 'Lost In The Moment', it's clear this isn't just another Pale White record. Adam Hope's vocals soar over sharp, shifting instrumentation, balancing raw emotion with intrigue. This energy never wavers, with every track feeling purposeful, every moment considered. There's an undeniable vintage glow to the whole affair, a self-released project that feels timeless yet rooted in the modern working-class experience. 'The Big Sad' isn't just an evolution; it's a revelation. The Pale White have peeled back the layers, and uncovered something compelling. **FINLAY HOLDEN**



GHOST
SKELETÁ
★★★★☆

➜ Behold, with their sixth album 'Skeletá', Ghost have finally found their luxurious 80s indulgence. The 2025 iteration of metal fave Tobias Forge is embracing the heartachingly rapturous and channelling proggy menace, which is to say: everything is big, loud, and dripping with gilded lore. 'Peacefield' introduces the magnitude of 'Skeletá' with an atmospheric mist parting before the track begins in earnest. And while this appetiser gives an overarching taste of what's to come, follow-up 'Lachryma' goes hell for leather with the metal-pop combination Ghost have perfected. Each following cut is a well-executed jewel in the weighty crown this record becomes. A Ghost album is always a good time - wickedly indulgent and theatric, dramatic and rocking - and 'Skeleta' continues to prove why Tobias and co. are not only mainstays but so beloved. **STEVEN LOFTIN**

ELTON JOHN AND BRANDI CARLILE
WHO BELIEVES IN ANGELS?
★★★★☆



➜ 'Who Believes In Angels?' is a collaboration that reads like a love letter to possibility itself. The album's emotional centre orbits around mortality and connection, and Elton and Brandi sparkle with creative electricity and love for both each other and their craft. What elevates 'Who Believes In Angels?' is the palpable joy of creation - every track feels essential, considered, alive. This is what happens when two behemoths of musical excellence find common ground, not in nostalgia, but in the endless possibility of what comes next. **FELICITY NEWTON**

WITCH POST
BEAST
★★★★☆



➜ Alaska Reid first joined Dylan Fraser to feature on his 2022 solo track 'Vampire', but it wasn't until the release of swirling, energetic 'Chill Out' that we'd be truly introduced to the duo now known as Witch Post. Mysterious and unspoken as they are, the frayed seams at which these two eccentric worlds conjoin are where the promise lies - the tense pre-chorus of 'Dreaming' is one such highlight from their debut EP, 'Beast': the first true totem on their united journey. Diverse musings exist here simultaneously, and the delightful mess, an ominous storm of looming potential, is a joy to witness. **FINLAY HOLDEN**

CAR SEAT HEADREST
THE SCHOLARS
★★★★☆



➜ Car Seat Headrest truly appreciate the epic. After a long period of inactivity, they've returned with a 9-track rock opera that's as gloriously grandiose as it is existential. Part spiritual crisis, part cultural battlefield; 'The Scholars' is a dense sonic stew rife with texture, feeling, and (a light sprinkle of) literary pretension. The album is split into two parts, both revolving around the fictional Parnassus University within which a sort of spiritual war erupts: doubt versus clarity, tradition versus revolution. It's sometimes sprawling, sometimes disjointed, but consistently entertaining. **REBECCA KESTEVAN**

PUP
WHO WILL LOOK AFTER THE DOGS?
★★★★★



➜ Not many bands can go five for five when delivering iconic, next level records, but Canadian punks PUP have continued their hot streak with 'Who Will Look After the Dogs?'. Going back to basics, it captures Stefan Babcock and co. at their front-footed best, reminiscent of their early years in style if not substance. These are songs that you need to sit with, that need to be digested. There's so much more here than just a sharp lyric and a pointed barb, there's real emotion – whether that's distress, anger, regret, even joy. It's the crowning glory of their peerless five-album run. **ROB MAIR**

LUCIUS
LUCIUS
★★★☆☆



➜ Lucius return with an album that trades their previous glossy sheen for something more intimate. Where 2022's 'Second Nature' embraced 80s maximalism and bombast, their self-titled fourth outing pulls back the curtain on rawer territory. Self-producing for the first time since their earliest days, the band aim for living room intimacy with their exploration of loss and renewal. Those harmonies still enchant, and their arranging prowess never falters. Yet where previous records found liberation within their precision, here they occasionally seem constrained by it. **JORDAN ELLISON**



VIAGRA BOYS
VIAGR ABOYS
★★★★★



➜ 'Man Made of Meat', the first single from Swedish nonsense-punks Viagra Boys' fourth album 'viagr aboys', includes: a mention of Chandler Bing, frontman Sebastian Murphy burping into the mic, and at least one mention of goblins. So far, so Viagra Boys.

Follow-up single 'Uno II' was the first hint that things might be a little bit different this time around. Sure, it's a song from the perspective of a dog with rotten teeth, but it also features an eerie flute instrumental and a distinctly stripped back sound compared to the band's usual output. The logical sonic continuation of 'The Cognitive Trade-off Hypothesis' from 2022's 'Cave World', it's a refreshing change of pace and the choice to put it front and centre as one of the album's lead singles shows a band who are keen to keep evolving.

This same spirit of experimentation reigns across the album as a whole. 'Medicine for Horses' grapples with mental illness (but still finds room to pine for the days when you could "pay a guy to get his horse to stomp you on the head"), and album closer 'River King' is an out and out love song, complete with piano.

On the flipside of these bold strides into unknown territory there's plenty for fans of debut album 'Street Worms' to enjoy. 'The Bog Body' is a ranting, raving trip through the jealousy one might feel if their partner fell in love with an ancient mummified corpse, while 'Waterboy' sees Sebastian meandering through disjointed images from a less than salubrious past - stealing bikes, passing out on sofas, and generally living the kind of life he now effortlessly parodies on 'You N33d Me' ("I can drink about 15 beers or maybe 25, it depends on the can").

Viagra Boys have always felt like a clever band who revel in acting dumb. On 'viagr aboys' this is just as true as ever, with impressively intricate instrumentals backing up the organised chaos of Sebastian's mind. It all gels so well that at times you forget that you're listening to a man talking about how he's sacrificing goats to aid his wellbeing, or being kicked out of the supermarket for *ahem* touching himself by the health food shelf. Or maybe you won't forget - it's all part of Viagra Boys' appeal, after all. **JAKE HAWKES**

CLUTTER
LOVES YOU EP
★★★★☆

➜ From the moment 'Loves You' kicks in, Stockholm's Clutter channel the pure, unfiltered joy of a late-night basement show where the amps are too loud and everyone's having the time of their lives. Their debut EP packs six tracks of gloriously messy guitar music that bridges the gap between 90s alternative heritage and contemporary punk's DIY spirit. They're not here to reinvent the genre - they're here to remind us why we fell for it in the first place. **FELICITY NEWTON**

HOTGIRL
BLAST OFF EP
★★★☆☆



➜ Dublin's Hotgirl have mastered the art of making a meaningful racket. Their debut EP 'Blast Off' arrives with all the subtlety of a brick through a window, yet beneath the chaos lies something more nuanced than first impressions might suggest. 'On The Brink' stands tallest among these four offerings, channelling Courtney Love. Ashley Abbedeen delivers "I don't know what to say; I've only half a brain" with a sneer that could cut glass. It's a first step taken at full sprint - not always steady on its feet, but impossible to ignore. **FELICITY NEWTON**

TEEN MORTGAGE

DEVIL ULTRASONIC DREAM

★★★★☆



→ Inside Teen Mortgage's 'Devil Ultrasonic Dream' lurks something wickedly good – a debut that bottles lightning and serves it neat. The duo have created a record that plays like The Damned gate-crashing a Black Mirror episode, all spit and circuits and delicious discord. The thematic throughline – using satanic panic imagery to critique modern censorship and religious conservatism – could have felt heavy-handed. Instead, it works as both social commentary and pure adrenaline fuel. This is more than a collection of razor-sharp punk songs: it's a statement of intent. **HARRY SHAW**

LUCY DACUS

FOREVER IS A FEELING

★★★★☆





→ Love changes everything, as they say, and on Lucy Dacus's fourth album 'Forever Is A Feeling', it transforms her already remarkable songwriting into something truly special. Following her time with boygenius and their recent Grammy success, Dacus returns with her most assured and intimate work yet, exploring the dizzy heights and quiet depths of romance with disarming honesty.

The album's production, helmed by Dacus and Blake Mills, creates a warm embrace. Opening track 'Big Deal' sets the tone with hushed vocals floating over acoustic guitars and misty reverb. When the arrangements expand, as on the strings-laden 'Modigliani', they do so with remarkable restraint, adding texture without overwhelming the delicate emotional core of each song.

Single 'Ankles' is an obvious highlight. Evolving from a ballad into something more playful, it mirrors the themes of how love reshapes us, with Dacus' vocal carrying both a vulnerability and strength. The production throughout is intentional. When the guitars get fuzzy, they remain carefully placed in the mix, the storytelling staying front and centre.

Collaborations feel equally thoughtful, with guest appearances (including an unexpectedly complementary turn from Hozier) serving the songs rather than stealing focus. It's this careful balance that makes 'Forever Is A Feeling' work so well - every element supports Dacus's exploration of how profound connections leave their mark, even as time marches on.

If there's a note of critique to be found, the album's restraint can occasionally feel a little controlled. She's not trying to grab attention with flashy tricks, though - instead crafting a record designed to tell the truth about love in all its messy glory.

The result is an album that feels both timeless and distinctly modern. It's a record that grows richer with each listen, revealing new layers of meaning in its carefully crafted lyrics and arrangements. While 'Forever Is A Feeling' might not shout for attention, it rewards those who lean in close. **DAN HARRISON**

SUNFLOWER BEAN

MORTAL PRIMETIME

★★★★☆



→ 'Mortal Primetime' finds Sunflower Bean at their most assured and adventurous, wielding their instruments like storytellers painting with light and shadow. The New York trio's latest album crackles with the electricity of a band who've grown comfortable in their own skin while refusing to settle into predictability. From the menacing guitar work that opens 'Champagne Taste', it's clear this isn't the same wide-eyed group that burst onto the scene as teenagers. TEach track carrying the weight of lived experience without sacrificing the band's characteristic wit and charm. **JORDAN ELLISON**



PUNCHBAG

I'M NOT YOUR PUNCHBAG EP

★★★★☆



→ South London siblings PUNCHBAG - Clara and Anders Bach - have fashioned a five-track EP that pirouettes between pristine pop and deliberate destruction, each song a carefully orchestrated collision. 'Fuck It' announces their manifesto, the kind of track that makes perfect sense at 2am, whether you're dancing or demolishing the front row. This creative tension runs through the EP's DNA, reaching its apex on title-track 'I'm Not Your Punchbag', where biting lines cut through pulsing electronics and serrated riffs. It's gloriously untamed and utterly magnetic. **HARRY SHAW**

MODEL/ACTRIZ

PIROUETTE

★★★★☆



→ 'Pirouette' is a razor-sharp ballet of industrial menace and pop vulnerability. The Brooklyn quartet's second album dances between chaos and beauty, with tracks like 'Cinderella' and 'Poppy' oozing sinister charm. Cole Haden's vocals shift from confessional to theatrical, while Seth Manchester's production captures every whispered secret. From the meditative 'Vespers' to the explosive 'Ring Road', the record pulses with transformation. It's a masterfully balanced blend of aggression and elegance - art school intensity meets fight club fury. **FELICITY NEWTON**

TUNDE ADEBIMPE

THEE BLACK BOLTZ

★★★★☆



→ Tunde Adebimpe's 'Thee Black Boltz' is a joyful revelation. The TV On The Radio frontman's solo debut channels personal turbulence into a kaleidoscopic celebration, feeling like stepping into an alternate dimension where funk, soul, and experimental art-rock collide with the gleaming possibilities of retro-futurism. This is an album that wears its sci-fi influences proudly while remaining deeply human at its core. It's a testament to the transformative power of creative resilience. **JORDAN ELLISON**

OK GO

AND THE ADJACENT POSSIBLE

★★★☆☆



→ A decade's quite the gap between albums, and 'And the Adjacent Possible' sees OK Go navigating their own mythology with mixed results. There are plenty of well-constructed moments and interesting ideas throughout, it's just that their experimental spirit and vitality feels diluted. The record shows its heart in quieter corners; 'This Is How It Ends', in particular, strips away the clever-clever to deliver something disarmingly sincere and tender. But the sharp hooks and angular energy are missing, and the album lacks the wide-eyed wonder of their breakthrough days. **JORDAN ELLISON**

THE MOONLANDINGZ

T-SHIRT NOTHING ELSE EP

★★★★☆



→ Seven years after their delightfully unhinged debut, The Moonlandingz have returned with 'No Rocket Required', an album that's equal parts disco swagger and philosophical rambling, delivered with a knowing wink and a shot of something stronger than usual. While not every experiment lands, there's something admirable about a band that can make you dance while questioning everything from masculinity to musical elitism. The Moonlandingz have built a world where profound truths hide in plain sight, dressed in sequins and speaking in riddles. **JORDAN ELLISON**



D4VD

WITHERED

★★★★☆



→ Heart-break has rarely sounded so pristine. With his debut album 'WITHERED', 19-year-old Houston native dv4d has crafted a collection that traces the lifecycle of love gone wrong, each track another petal falling from an already fragile flower. By the time we reach 'Ghost' with its opening plea "Why don't you love me?", the emotional weight becomes almost suffocating. It's perhaps fitting for an album named 'WITHERED' - this isn't meant to be an easy listen. Like the dying rose of its metaphor, there's beauty in the decay. **FELICITY NEWTON**

ARTIST'S GUIDE

THE DRI OBSESSION



There's something gloriously contradictory about brothers Ross and Rocky Lynch naming their fourth album 'Obsession' while operating in a world where attention spans have been whittled down to 20 second snippets. The Driver Era have created a record that demands you stick around – eleven tracks that skip between late-night hedonism and morning-after clarity with remarkable finesse.

'Obsession' represents the boldest evolution yet for the alt-pop duo. The album emerged from a collection of songs the brothers were, quite literally, obsessed with creating – pouring hours into each track with the kind of dedication that makes sleep optional and creativity essential. The result is striking, weaving electric riffs, rich synths and infectious rhythms into a soundtrack for life.

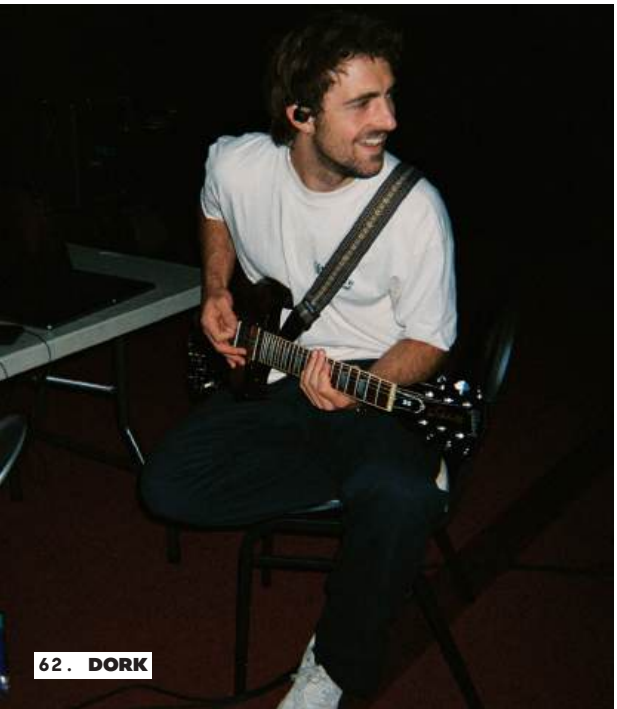
This isn't their first rodeo. With over 400 million global streams and a reputation for unmissable live shows, The Driver Era – former Dork cover stars, 'FYI' – have been steadily building their musical universe since 2018. But 'Obsession' marks a shift toward more introspective songwriting while refining their signature sound. It's music made by veterans who still approach each song with the excitement of newcomers.

As they prepare to take these songs on the road for their massive North American Obsession Tour, the album serves as both party starter and emotional compass – a collection that understands the value of fleeting moments while searching for something more permanent amid the chaos. Check out our latest Artist's Guide for Ross and Rocky's own thoughts on the record, track by track.

YOU KEEP ME UP AT NIGHT

Ross: I was about to scrap it. I said, "Guys, let's keep jamming." But Ellington and Rocky were like, "No, no, no, no, no." That's another song that goes into the themes of the album nicely. We're staying up late, and we're trying to soak up these times and make memories. Really, we started hanging out with this friend group of lowkey partygoers, and it was inspiring because they had all of this music that I hadn't really been listening to. A lot of pop music I feel like we would have rather grown up with if we had gone to normal school. But, you know, I was on TV instead. It was kind of like a reintroduction to the culture that I probably should have been a part of more. Getting to hang out with them, staying up late at night, listening to this music, being reckless and being a kid. I feel like that's where this song comes from. A lot of my younger life, I've been a professional for a long time. This song, it's a celebration of being young and reckless.

Rocky: With this song, I felt that it always had some legs. I always was like, "If we can get this shit right, it cooks."



DON'T WALK AWAY

Ross: 'Don't Walk Away,' was again in search of love, in search of a connection and a brief romance that I had in Paris that I thought could have been a long-term relationship - it turns out that it wasn't quite right. I think this record could be called 'Something of a Lover Boy' or something like that, 'Something of a Romantic'. This was a collaboration with the same team that did 'Don't Take the Night' and 'Same Old Story'. It was me, Rocky, Ellington, and Morgan.

TOUCH

Ross: 'Touch' is coming from a real place of feeling myself. We're probably going to the club, and I'm kind of feeling invigorated. Those lyrics are true to the story. Like "holy in my jeans" - maybe, you know, spending a little too much money. We're trying to have a good time, looking for "love in all the wrong places". It's about feeling cool, feeling tough.

Rocky: Also, I normally always joke and I'm like, "Hmm. I don't know if I have a favourite lyric, blah blah blah." In 'Touch,' my favourite lyric is when Ross sings, "There's no time to waste."

Ross: The undertone messages throughout the album are ideas of "there's no time to waste," "youth is precious", "where's the love", "the night is fading... let's fucking send it. We don't know how much longer we have until the sun's coming up..." Those are the kinds of overarching themes in the album. And I think 'Touch' is more on the bad boy side of that, where it's the initiation of the night. You're just feeling tough and feeling like you're about to go have the best night of your life.

'SAME OLD STORY'

Ross: 'Same Old Story' is... is continuing the same story. This is after you've gone to the club, after you've found that person you're like, "Wait a second, I actually do like you, this isn't actually like an infatuation moment, I might actually have feelings for you for real."

And it's the same old story. I'm not ready to commit because maybe we both just got out of relationships and whatnot. Maybe we're both kind of stoked to be free and single in this world. We're having fun in the club, but the truth of the matter is we actually do have feelings for each other and every time we're in the club, we always end up in a corner talking or dancing or just us two.

Rocky: There's something special in the bridge. The whole song is like "the same old shit", we've been in this life for a long time now, we're veterans-ish. But I love when the bridge is cooking and the line, "I hope it never ends." I feel like that's a special moment because it's the same old story over and over again but actually, I want to keep going.

Ross: We pulled up to the studio with Ellington and one of our favourite collaborators on this record, Morgan Taylor Reed. And initially, I had the line "same old story" in my phone. Originally, I was frustrated because, at the time, I felt like we kept sacrificing our music for our touring success. It turned into this thing of, "How come every pop song on the radio is the same story? Where is the originality in the narrative in pop music?" and then it kind of became about a real-life scenario that I was experiencing. But yeah, we just wrote it in a day in the studio, and we all felt really strong about it once it happened.

'THE WEEKEND'

Ross: 'The Weekend' is continuing this energy, this obsession of trying to make the most of the time and the fact that the weekend really signifies, culturally, this time of freedom. You have two days, and you can do whatever you want. Symbolically, I think that represents the album quite well and signifies the kind of recklessness of being young and dumb and in the sun on the weekend.

Rocky: You kind of like someone, maybe they like you back, but you're like strangers on vacation. I feel like that song is just kind of like, "Let's see what happens." Production-wise, it's probably our most pop-punk track. It has a little bit of that influence we don't lean towards too often when we were growing up.

'DON'T TAKE THE NIGHT'

Ross: I feel like this one is pretty self-explanatory, it's sort of about self-discovery. There's definitely the overarching theme of the record, which is like "let's make the most of these moments," infatuation, etc.

Rocky: It's kind of also developed a new meaning, which I feel like happens all the time with our songs later in life, like after something has changed or developed in our life. It's like, "Don't stop the good

VER ERA

THE DRIVER ERA

OBSESSION

★★★★☆



→ 'Obsession' finds Ross and Rocky Lynch dancing on the knife-edge between euphoric release and personal epiphanies, marking what might just be The Driver Era's most considered collection yet.

'You Keep Me Up At Night' bursts through the speakers like a text you shouldn't send but absolutely will. 'Touch' could fill any dancefloor worth its salt, yet retains enough grit to feel honest, and 'The Weekend' channels their pop-punk DNA. It's a delicate balance, but one they maintain with surprising grace.

Lyrically, the album grapples with recurring themes of impermanence and transformation. 'Don't Walk Away' transforms a Parisian fling into a sharp take on love in the age of read receipts, while 'Same Old Story' dissects relationship patterns with the kind of clarity that only comes after making the same mistakes twice. Or three times. Or four. The record finds its heart as it progresses. 'I'd Rather Die' faces down self-destructive tendencies with unflinching honesty, before 'I Can't Believe She Got Away' alchemises heartbreak into wisdom. By the time 'Better' rolls around, its cautious optimism feels well-earned.

While not every experiment lands perfectly, the brothers' commitment to their vision results in their most assured release to date. This is feel-good music with enough substance to keep you coming back after the party's over. 'Obsession' may be preoccupied with fleeting moments, but it leaves a lasting impression that suggests this duo's best work may still lie ahead. **HARRY SHAW**

times." Imagine if you could tour the world and play music and go out in a beautiful city... I don't want that to leave.

'I'D RATHER DIE'

Ross: 'I'd Rather Die' is the same dream team of Morgan, Rocky, Ellington, and myself. It's the same kind of concept where we're tackling the concept of obsession and habits and basically just saying, "I know these things are killing me, but like I'm not quite ready to give them up, so I'll do it tomorrow," like, I'm not ready.... don't take the night because I'd rather die.

Rocky: There's an immense knowledge in the line, "I'll do it tomorrow." If you can't do the thing that you are trying to do today or right now, most likely, you will probably keep saying, "I'll do it tomorrow" and then before you know it... you're dead. It can be more subtle than that, like, "Oh, let me do that thing that I've been wanting to do," but haven't. There's a bit of that loop, there's a bit of that same old story we're referencing to where everyone has their own loop that they probably can climb out of by doing it today instead of tomorrow. But again, to unbox that, you kind of have to dive really deep and I think there's immense knowledge to that.

'I CAN'T BELIEVE SHE GOT AWAY'

Ross: I started this one - I had the topline and a lot of the production, like some of the guitar and the bass. And then, Rocky and Garrison really took this production to the next level. You can kind of predict the future sometimes with songs in a strange way. For me, lyrically this song was about break-up blues because when I was in my previous relationship, we were talking like it was endgame. We were planning what the rest of our life was gonna look like. And so this song started like this, like, "Wow, I can't believe she got away after we were talking about all of that." The second verse, I pretty much freestyle rapped based on some experience - like, you know the lyric "I was on my knees"? I was like, I was thinking about proposing for a second. But you know, everything seems to have happened for a reason and I think this song turned out really good.

'EVERYBODY'S LOVER'

Ross: I feel like it's a commentary on monogamy and its challenges that people are having in the modern day of the internet and social media. It's a really interesting time for monogamous relationships, and I think people, especially young people, are challenged with this constant bombardment on your phone. So, I think this song has a nod to that.

'BETTER'

Ross: 'Better' is about the obsession we have of getting better as men, as people, as athletes, as musicians. I definitely have an obsession with trying to be the best version of myself. Sometimes these relationships and these people that come in and out of your life, you know, sometimes it can leave you heartbroken or leave you in an emotional state but inevitably it's leaving you better. You're learning from these positions and situations. Even when shit hits the fan or you fail, you're getting better. So it's an uplifting story and it's something that I'm definitely obsessed with. ■



JULIEN BAKER & TORRES

SEND A PRAYER MY WAY

★★★★☆



→ Morgan Wallen, Shaboozey, and Chappell Roan (kinda) are just some of the names that have put country music well and truly back on the map.

Far from jumping on the bandwagon, Julien Baker and TORRES have offered their talents to Americana, producing an album that injects the most 'trad' of all the genres with a much-needed kick into the 21st century through tales of queer love and the vulnerability of identity.

'Send A Prayer My Way' is an album that is beautifully poised and effortlessly natural, alternating between the raw, strained quality of Baker's vocals and TORRES' raspier, earthier tones to create a record perfectly balanced by flawless harmony and a fearless approach to the whole country music spectrum. Gut-wrenching opener 'Dirt' finds its home at the folkier end, as acoustic guitar is embellished with classic clawhammer electric guitar, all providing the ideal backdrop for Julien Baker to bear her soul and break your heart. 'The Only Marble I Have Left' journeys down into the Deep South as rhythms sit just at the edge of syncopation, before 'Sugar In The Tank' illuminates the kind of country-rock that makes you understand the genre's enduring appeal.

Traditional country imagery – 'Bottom of a Bottle', 'Off the Wagon' – pays homage to the dive bars and open roads of America's Wild West that birthed country music, while 'Tuesday' and 'Sylvia' present narratives of queer awakening, inbuilt and enforced shame, and illicit romance, that make this project so powerful. They open a conservative genre for people previously excluded from the scene, allowing them to stand proud and tall in a world trying to cut them down simply for existing.

'Send A Prayer My Way' is a heart-bursting record that underlines the power of unity in a fractured world. A must-listen. **CIARAN PICKER**

GET OUT

SPILLING THE TEA ON THE GIGS WE'VE SEEN.



THE O2. LONDON

THERE'S NO WAY THIS WILL BE HER ONLY HEADLINE SHOW HERE.

GRACIE ABRAMS' HEARTFELT POP PACKS OUT THE O2

➜ Bedroom pop has rarely reached the whopping capacities of the UK arena circuit without transforming into something weightier – think Billie Eilish's darker electronic edge, Girl In Red's recent power balladry or Conan Gray's gradual pivot to full on 80s pop – but here's Gracie Abrams, unwavering in her dedication to delicate, heartfelt pop and packing out The O2 in London.

She's strikingly similar to Taylor Swift (fondly referred to as a 'Taydaughter' across social media platforms) in songwriting style (confessional, relatable, acoustic guitar-laden), fan devotion level (the hair bow appears to be the Abrams equivalent of the Eras friendship bracelet), and ability to forge a meaningful connection with the audience in a massive room. Maybe it's something she learned opening up for Swift on a sizeable chunk of her Eras Tour, but even free of all the Taylor ties, Gracie holds her own.

After all, Gracie's star power has been slowly ascending for years now, culminating in her most recent hit 'That's So True' sticking at the top of the UK singles chart for eight weeks, but the feverish energy of that track only occasionally translates tonight. The Secret Of Us Tour opening is pure magic for a moment, 'Felt Good About You' has Gracie hidden behind a screen before drifting to the front of the stage for 'Risk', where dry ice billows into the crowd, and 'Blowing Smoke' completes the opening trio of tracks following the running order of the record.

Gracie Abrams' signatures become clearer on stage, the songs are tremendously wordy, and the mostly-teenage-girl crowd impressively keep up, feeling every syllable. While the set leans (obviously) heavily on 2024's breakthrough album 'The Secret Of Us', there's a surprising lack of debut 'Good Riddance', and a slight preference for her own earlier work from EP 'minor'. Amongst those is '21', the song she opened her first ever London show with at Omeara in 2021, a performance she reminisces in a speech where she seems bewildered by her own rise.

But after the initial boom, it becomes apparent that this is how much of the set will go. Frustratingly, Gracie's performance style doesn't seem to have evolved much since that very first show, and sure, her music is intimate, but The O2 isn't, and it's hard to fill it without significantly beefing the tracks up, a choice that is rarely made here. Gracie is often pegged as part of the new pop crop, and statistically she absolutely is, but when pitted against her peers – Olivia Rodrigo, Sabrina Carpenter, Chappell Roan, Tate McRae, as a few – and what they'd do with a space like this, it's hard to view them as at the same level.

When she returns to the main stage for the final stretch, it's as cathartic as you'd wish the rest of the show had been. 'us.', the Taylor Swift-featuring and 'folklore'-indebted semi-titular track blossoms fantastically, amped up just enough to hurtle into 'Free Now'. The encore, 'That's So True' and 'Close To You' is a confetti cannon away from perfect pop euphoria.

Perhaps Gracie's rapid incline has meant she's here too early, but compared to the cosiness of her Shepherds Bush Empire show a mere 18 months ago, The O2 is missing that warmth. Still, it's hard not to see Gracie Abrams' potential, and with the legions of fans she has and material to warrant them, there's no way this will be her only headline show here. **ABIGAIL FIRTH**



PICTURE PARLOUR KICKSTART THEIR NEW CHAPTER

THE 100 CLUB, LONDON

IF MAKING HISTORY IS STANDARD AT THE 100 CLUB, PICTURE PARLOUR DELIVER THEIR RETURN BY UNVEILING A SHOW THAT REALISES THAT AMBITION.

➜ When Dork's Night Out rolls into The 100 Club, there's a palpable sense of history unfolding before your eyes. From the scattered images of past greats lining the walls to the atmosphere of Oxford Street's premier music hall, every element speaks of landmark moments.

It's the perfect setting for Picture Parlour's next chapter. Moving with an indescribable swagger, tonight's ushering of a new era stems from every drop of ambition they've shown since the start. With posters adorning the walls (motioning to 'Save The Parlour') and matchboxes featuring a phone number to glimpse what's ahead, tonight feels like Picture Parlour unveiling the scope of their potential.

Leaning into a setlist of mostly unreleased music, The 100 Club stands in awe of a bold reintroduction. The spellbinding cinematic flair that first captivated audiences with 'Norwegian Wood' now meets fizzing, crunching riffs that defy any doubters. Opener 'Cielo Drive' rings like a modern classic meant for grandstand TV stages, yet through a distinctly 2025 lens, while 'Who's There To Love' delivers garage-rock punch with White Stripes energy.

This feeling courses through Picture Parlour's entire set. 'Neptune 66' leaps from hypnotic calls to psyche-breakdowns to roaring rock fury with mammoth impact, while the bouncing 'Talk About It' and ready-made classic 'Used To Be Your Girlfriend' showcase their expansive sonic world. 'Face In The Picture', an all-encompassing 'Ronnie' and the arm-in-arm singalong of 'Judgement Day' are greeted like cherished old friends.

They close at The 100 Club, fans pressing closer, with the song that started it all – 'Norwegian Wood' – but tonight belongs to the future. Picture Parlour have evolved into an even bolder version of their promised potential. You're no longer just invited to the Parlour: it's a mandatory requirement. We wouldn't have it any other way. **JAMIE MUIR**

THE O2. LONDON

TOMORROW X TOGETHER SHOW THEMSELVES TO BE A DIFFERENT KIND OF K-POP GROUP.





CHLOE SLATER BRINGS RIDICULOUS FUN TO LONDON'S OMEARA

OMEARA, LONDON

TONIGHT'S GIG IS THE LAST DATE OF CHLOE'S FIRST-EVER UK HEADLINE RUN.

→ "I like to do this thing where I scream... I don't know if you've noticed," grins Chloe Slater halfway through a rowdy headline gig at London's Omeara. Last year's debut EP 'The Price Of Fun' was a snarling attack on shitty landlords, inequality and corrupt systems, while recently released follow-up 'Love Me Please' was more intimate but no less scathing. Tonight, she plays every one of those glorious guitar anthems. Spitting venom but using that same rage to create a sense of shared euphoria, the whole thing feels like a much-needed purge.

"My music is a good mix of wanting to spread awareness about certain issues and make people feel seen that are struggling with these things," Chloe told Dork earlier this year. "I want them to come to my show and let it all out. I want them to know that everything is going to be okay."

Tonight's gig is the last date of Chloe's first-ever UK headline run and is already far more ambitious than a simple dash through her entire back catalogue. The carefully crafted show starts with the barbed spoken word attack from 'Sucker' ("How does it feel to know your millions could feed a ton?") and ends with the entire room singing along to the 'Fig Tree', a posi-punk song that matches the feisty determination of Iggy Pop's 'Lust For Life'. Chloe makes sure the entire room repeats the line "I'll choose the life that is mine", sending them out into an uncertain world with a defiant message of hope.

In between, there's the fizzing indie sleaze disco of 'Death Trap', the twinkling emo of 'Thomas Street', and the viciously playful 'Nothing Shines On This Island', offering the crowd joy and space for shared frustration. Debut single 'Sinking Feeling!' makes room for fear and anxiety-riddled burnout while chirpy new song 'Harriet' is far surer of itself, dealing with jealousy and hurt over arena-baiting guitar licks.

A lush cover of The Cure's 'Friday I'm In Love' ("I didn't write this song, but I wish I had") opens the door for the giddy chaos that comes with 'Price On Fun', a track written for jubilant festival sets. It's the perfect warm-up for the mass singalong that sarcastic breakout track '24 Hours' inspires. Not for the first time tonight, Chloe can only grin at how ridiculously fun it all is. The pointed 'Fig Tree' offers one last burst of snotty catharsis to go alongside the empathy, community, rage and fierce optimism. It's powerful stuff. **ALI SHUTLER**

NIGHTBUS, SLATE AND PUNCHBAG ARE IMPOSSIBLE TO RESIST

SEBRIGHT ARMS, LONDON



→ Dork doesn't stop. Following a packed February of shows across the country, Dork's Night Out rolls into the Sebright Arms for an evening that screams 'exciting'.

Punchbag are exactly that. A glorious indie-pop bubblegum explosion that plasters across the walls of the Sebright Arms from the first note of 'I'm Not Your Punchbag'.

Slate arrive and transfix immediately. With echoes of post-punk greatness – the fizzing rush of early Fontaines D.C and the chimes of Echo & The Bunnymen – there is something standout about this band. Frontman Jack Shephard leads with an erratic, entrancing presence, the propulsion of 'Tabernacl' capturing Slate's force.

Headlining a night like this takes something special, and Nightbus are that something special. Since emerging, their journey has been soaked in awe and wrapped in mystery. "We played this venue two years ago and it was our first ever gig," lead singer Olivia notes one song in. "This feels very full circle, because we've got an album recorded. It's ready, and tonight we'll play some new songs off it."

"We'll be about for one hour," announces Olive, "and then we're going to get a kebab." Sounds like a plan. **JAMIE MUIR**

CLAIRO OFFERS A MASTERCLASS IN HOW TO MAKE A SIT-DOWN SHOW NOT BORING

EVENTIM APOLLO, LONDON

CLAIRO'S 'CHARM' ERA IS PACKED WITH LESSONS ON HOW TO STAY TRUE TO YOUR OWN VISION.

→ The conversation pit, an interior design feature for spacious living rooms, features sofas arranged in a U shape facing one another rather than facing technology, for the sole purpose of relaxing and chatting. They haven't been popular since the 70s. Tonight, Clairo turns London's Eventim Apollo stage into one.

Her third album, 2024's 'Charm', pulls from that same period before the black mirror governed our living rooms; it radiates warmth, looking towards 70s soul, psychedelia and baroque pop for influence (most of this mood board features in the pre-show playlist). On the album's respective tour, she does a stunning job of bringing that feel to the stage.

It's not that Clairo is opposed to technology – she came up on the internet after all, and the popularity of 'Charm' track 'Juna' has been bolstered by TikTok – but it definitely feels like she's fostering an environment where it isn't the focus. An announcement requests no flash photography throughout, she performs wearing wired headphones (God, is that vintage now?); you could patronisingly call her an old soul but she connects too well with her largely gen z audience to ever be such.

So when she saunters on stage with her band – to sit down and have a drink while Wendy Rene's 'After Laughter (Comes Tears)' plays – it's to the kind of cheers usually reserved for the biggest pop stars in the world, but even in a theatre as elaborate as Hammersmith's Apollo, nothing can shatter this illusion of intimacy.

Opening with 'Nomad', Clairo's voice is much less delicate than on record, it's richer and clearer, as are the band, who bring the album to life with ease. Tracks like 'Thank You' and 'Add Up My Love' almost enter 60s girl group territory, while the relaxed, jazzy 'Terrapin' and 'Slow Dance' are a cigar away from drawing room backdrop perfection.

While there's an obvious preciousness to the quieter tracks that 'Charm' offers, there's an even clearer yearn for Clairo's bedroom pop days and exit from them on 2019's 'Immunity'. When the guitars kick in on 'North', or the biggest singalong of the night, 'Bags', they aren't necessarily presented with the same grit as they are on record, instead they sway more towards her current psych rock sound, suggesting it's what she's been searching for all along. Breakout single '4EVER' is fed through the same machine, the wobbly synths replaced by droning keyboards and copious cowbell.

Putting the slow stuff in the first half works great, by the time '4EVER' is ticked off the setlist, the crowd are itching for something to have a proper dance to, Clairo noticing that herself and mentioning it. A forewarned 'surprise' comes in the form of the live debut of 'Steeeam', one of two tracks released by her secret lockdown band Shelly, is well received by the super stans (maybe not as well as the Charli xcx guest appearance Laneway Festival got though, eh?) and kicks things back into gear for the final few songs.

Clairo's 'Charm' era is packed with lessons on how staying true to your own vision will always prevail in the end (2024's artist motto, surely), and the tour is a masterclass in how to make a sit-down show not boring. **ABIGAIL FIRTH**

TOMORROW X TOGETHER'S EXPECTEDLY ELABORATE AFFAIR

→ TOMORROW X TOGETHER often refer to themselves as the rock stars of K-pop. Tonight at The O2, they spend nearly three hours trying to prove it.

It's the group's first ever performance in the UK, and as such, is an expectedly elaborate affair. The tour, titled 'ACT : PROMISE', is technically in support of their most recent EP, 'The Star Chapter: Sanctuary', a release anchored by its messaging of finally meeting someone you love; a very sweet and apt set of songs to bring to your first UK audience.

After opening with 'Sanctuary''s lead single 'Over The Moon', that sweetness is quickly abandoned for TXT's rockier sound, which becomes the mainstay for most of the show. If their speeches throughout are anything to go by – the boys take several opportunities to talk about how long they've wanted to perform here, being that England is the home of many iconic rock bands they're fans of – it's in this genre where their hearts lie, and the performance is all the better for it. The drama of last year's 'Deja Vu' is amped up with extra guitars, while '0X1=LOVESONG (I Know I Love You)', taken from their second album 'The Chaos Chapter: Freeze' and the moment they really leaned into heavier soundscapes, soars as an arena-ready anthem.

Ballads are kept to a minimum, with the exception of the 'Anti-Romantic', but the omission of most of their early big singles – debut 'CROWN', and lead singles '9 and Three Quarters', 'Can't You See Me?' and 'Blue Hour' – leaves a bit of a hit-shaped hole in the set. With a clear preference for the serious stuff, maybe they've just outgrown some of that teen angst. Still, TXT end the set on a note with 'I'll See You There Tomorrow', thrives thanks to its nods to British dance music, hopefully signalling that it won't be another six years before we see them again. **ABIGAIL FIRTH**



ANY OTHER QUESTIONS?

TOTAL TOMMY

YES, DEAR READER. WHILE THE MUSIC PRESS AT LARGE CONCERNS ITSELF WITH SUCH WEIGHTY MATTERS AS ARTISTIC EVOLUTION AND GENRE DECONSTRUCTION, WE'RE OVER HERE ASKING THE REALLY IMPORTANT QUESTIONS. LIKE TOTAL TOMMY ONCE WON A COLOURING COMPETITION. THE TALENT!

WHAT'S THE WEIRDEST THING YOU'VE EVER EATEN?
Hmm, snails?

WHAT IS YOUR EARLIEST MEMORY?
I think I was three or so, and I remember returning home with my parents after a holiday and mum and dad realised our house had been robbed. The cops came through and took fingerprints. It definitely stuck with me!

WHAT'S THE NAUGHTIEST THING YOU DID AT SCHOOL?
On a school camp when I was 15, my friends and I all went and got piercings with fake IDs; the teachers hated us. And I got sent home from school once when I was 12 for etching my name into a wooden table. The school made me pay for the table, and I had to do detention for weeks.

WHAT'S YOUR ULTIMATE MEAL DEAL COMBINATION?
OK, I hope we're talking about the supermarket kind. We don't have them in Australia, and every time I come to the UK, I am OBSESSED with them. Honestly, I'm pretty plain and simple with them; I just go a sandwich – usually something with chicken and salad - a banana and a Diet Coke.

IF YOU HAD TO PERFORM AT A TALENT SHOW TONIGHT, WHAT ACT WOULD YOU DO?
I love that game Space Jump – I'd probably steal an audience member and just make up a wild scenario and riff off each other and see what happens.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU'RE BRILLIANT AT BUT NOBODY ELSE KNOWS?
Holding my breath.

WHAT IS THE WORST JOB YOU'VE EVER DONE?
I worked in a call centre doing market research for a few weeks while I was in Uni. The boringest shit ever. It was torture; even to go pee, you had to set a timer and clock in and out. Safe to say I quit that one very quickly.



IF YOU HAD TO REBRAND AS A DIFFERENT GENRE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
Heavy metal would be pretty sick.

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN THROWN OUT OF SOMEWHERE?
Yes, a bar for being too high...

WHAT'S THE BEST THING YOU'VE EVER BOUGHT FOR UNDER £5?
A ticket to a concert when I was 18 that inspired me so much.

WHAT'S THE MOST RIDICULOUS LIE YOU BELIEVED AS A KID?
I used to believe my fortune was determined by those chatterbox paper things kids made in class. I'd take them so seriously!

WHAT'S A BORING FACT ABOUT YOURSELF?
I have a rare blood type that only 2% of the population have.

WHAT'S THE STRANGEST PLACE YOU'VE EVER WRITTEN A SONG?
On the floor of the shower in a hotel in Amsterdam, actually where I wrote my song 'Amsterdam'.

WHAT'S THE SILLIEST THING YOU OWN?
A framed picture of Cat in the Hat that sits right as you walk in the door to my apartment.

WHAT'S A PHRASE OR WORD YOU SAY WAY TOO MUCH?
'Do you think?'

IF YOU COULD BRING SOMETHING EXTINCT BACK TO LIFE, WHAT WOULD YOU CHOOSE?
Woolly Mammoths! What beautiful creatures.

HAVE YOU EVER WON ANYTHING?
Honestly, I think the last thing I won was a colouring competition at my local supermarket when I was a kid.

WHAT'S THE MOST UNUSUAL JOB YOU CAN IMAGINE YOURSELF DOING?
I'd love to open a dive bar and curate a lineup for it. I just love creating experiences for people, things that are kinda one night only things!

IF YOU HAD TO HAVE ONE WORD TATTOOED ON YOUR FACE, WHAT WORD WOULD YOU HAVE?
I'd probs get an angel number – 888 or 999, perhaps.

WHAT'S THE MOST ABSURD RUMOUR YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT YOURSELF?
Actually, a lot of people think I grew up in London, but I lived my whole life in Melbourne and more recently in Sydney. I do love London, though!

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN IN A SITUATION WHERE YOU THOUGHT, "WELL, THIS IS HOW I DIE"?
Yeah... I had a bad complication with getting my tonsils out a few years ago, and it was pretty scary! I'll spare you the detail cos it's kinda gory, but it was during Covid, and the nurses were super understaffed, and a mistake was made that definitely could have killed me!

IF YOU COULD BE BEST FRIENDS WITH A CELEBRITY YOU DO NOT KNOW, WHO WOULD YOU CHOOSE?
Jack Haven. I am so in awe of them.

HAVE YOU EVER HAD A CRUSH ON A FICTIONAL CHARACTER?
Lara Croft.

WHAT'S THE LAST THING YOU PUT IN YOUR ONLINE SHOPPING CART BUT DIDN'T BUY?
A pair of jeans from the UK, that I realised wouldn't arrive in time to Australia for when I wanted them for :(

WHAT'S THE STRANGEST THING YOU'VE EVER FOUND ON THE STREET?
I used to live in a neighbourhood where the street finds were actually really good! I've found random instruments before, and once I dragged an organ home, which sat in my studio for a year or so. It was really hard to get rid of when I moved house!

HOW PUNK ARE YOU OUT OF TEN?
At this current moment, a 4. I'm drinking coffee, with my hair in a top knot and in gym clothes very much needing a shower.

WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS?
Look, maybe it's the blood type thing; I'm just a lil freak. ■

total tommy plays Dork's Night Out at Sebright Arms, London on 7th May.


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FRI 31 OCT BECKETT SU LEEDS
SAT 01 NOV NEW CENTURY MANCHESTER
THU 06 NOV BARROWLAND BALLROOM GLASGOW
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DORK STAGE

Arthur Hill
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WEETWOOD MAC ESME EMERSON

COMEDY TENT

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