

Norah Jones

Visions BLUE NOTE



Has it really be more than two decades since **Norah Jones** seemingly emerged from out of nowhere with one of

the most popular debut albums of all time, *Come Away With Me*? Indeed it has, and that internationally successful release remains incredibly fresh and timeless. Jones could have stayed snugly within that milieu. But, despite strong sales on subsequent releases, she was never one to repeat herself and has always kept busy seeking other avenues of expression, working on side projects—sometimes as just another band member—with rappers, country artists and jazz musicians, even the Foo Fighters, in order to keep from getting stale. For *Visions*, her ninth studio album (and first non-holiday set since 2020), Jones does return to largely safe territory but not so safe that it feels like a retread. Writing or co-authoring a dozen new songs that stay largely within pop territory, Jones and her collaborators, helmed by producer/multi-instrumentalist **Leon Michels**, find inspiration in numerous places, from retro soul to 1960s girl groups to vintage Nashville. “Running,” the first single, strips things back to Jones’ vocal, piano, guitar and bass, and Michels’ baritone saxophone and drums. They cook up an instantly beguiling melody that they put to good use, telling of the futility of trying to escape: “In the night the devil knocks on my door/ I keep running, oh, I keep running away/ Another life and the same thing happened before.” But let’s not get too weighed down—Jones seems to be saying by placing “I Just Wanna Dance” next in the sequence. No, it’s not a Ramones song, not even close—despite a title and lyrics that never get much further than the desire to shake it (“I don’t wanna laugh about it/ I just wanna dance”)—but it’s got that good-time feel, and that’s nothing to complain about, now, is it?

Jeff Tamarkin

Waxahatchee

Tigers Blood ANTI-



With her fifth solo album, 2020’s *Saint Cloud*, **Katie Crutchfield** dialed down the amps and turned up the

twang—re-embracing her Southern roots, leaning back into a vocal drawl and channeling her love of folk icons like Lucinda Williams. The result was an artistic leap—a mature, tearjerking, immaculately produced work that cemented her spot among the era’s chief confessional songwriters. *Tigers Blood*—which follows 2022’s *I Walked With You a Ways*, a collaboration with Jess Williamson under the



Waxahatchee

name *Plains*—feels like a true sequel, carrying forward that momentum by teaming again with producer/multi-instrumentalist **Brad Cook**. Cosmetically, this new album deepens the country-rock aesthetic, adding touches of banjo, dobro, harmonica, pedal-steel and electric slide to an otherwise bare-bones quintet setup. The playing is also looser and rougher around the edges: “Ice Cold,” propelled by **Spencer Tweedy**’s addictively twitchy drumming, is a power-pop classic tailor-made for a heartland rocker to cover on a tiny bar stage; “Bored” is charmingly scrappy, with **MJ Lenderman** adding droopy-eyed distortion; many of the vocal harmonies have an unvarnished first-take wobble, prioritizing spirit over note-perfection. As a result, *Tigers Blood* feels a bit more low-stakes than its predecessor, but that offers its own endearing pull. Everything comes together amid the back-porch sigh of “Right Back to It,” which Crutchfield has described as her first legit love song. “I’ve been yours for so long,” she sings over laid-back drums and picked banjo flourishes. “We come right back to it.” *Ryan Reed*

Julian Lage

Speak to Me BLUE NOTE



It would be almost ludicrously lazy, at this point in his career, to simply call **Julian Lage** a jazz guitarist and think

that covers it. With more than a dozen albums to his name over the past 15 years, Lage has continued

to reach out into new musical areas, making a mockery of genre borders and mixing things up to the point where it’d be foolhardy to try pinning labels on it. For *Speak to Me*, he’s aligned with producer **Joe Henry**, whose own credits run the gamut from Joan Baez to Mose Allison and Bettye LaVette. Henry’s an inspired choice as a teammate for Lage, who shares with him an insatiable desire to avoid treading on well-trodden turf. For this recording, Lage has recalled bassist **Jorge Roeder** and drummer **Dave King** from previous outings, augmenting that rhythm battery with, at various times, pianist **Kris Davis**, keyboardist **Patrick Warren** and saxophonist **Levon Henry** (Joe’s son). For some numbers, a basic quartet (sans Davis and Levon) is utilized and one tune, “Myself Around You,” features Lage solo on acoustic guitar. He also plays acoustic on the album opener, “Hymnal,” one of the quartet pieces, but don’t let its bucolic tones get too comfortable; by the next track, “Northern Shuffle,” the full sextet barges in, Lage employing a gritty rockabilly-esque touch that leaves no doubt that expecting the unexpected is the way to go. “Nothing Happens Here,” released as a single, might want to reconsider its title—with Lage on acoustic, Davis and Warren providing keys (including a Wurliitzer) and Levon blowing alto saxophone, there’s atmosphere and imagery galore. Jazz? Sure, it’s in there (“Two and One” swings, then goes where it wants to go), but *Speak to Me* goes its own way.

Jeff Tamarkin

Bleachers

Bleachers DIRTY HIT



On *Bleachers*’ self-titled fourth album, **Jack Antonoff** and his band continue to do what they’ve done

for a decade—produce anthemic, life-affirming rock songs that wistfully and nostalgically evoke their teenage years. “We were just kids,” Antonoff exclaims at the outset of the opener, “I Am Right on Time,” the first of 14 songs’ worth of earnest and introspective lyrics that could serve as the score—and even provide dialogue—for a modern-day John Hughes movie that takes place a year or two after high school graduation. With its Clarence Clemons-esque saxophone lines and references to Wawa and houses down the shore, the album is a love letter to New Jersey. (That saxophone sound cuts through a thick musical tapestry that also includes a variety of shouted “whoa-oh-ohs” and “sha-la-las.”) At times, *Bleachers* feels like a summation of several recent Antonoff projects. Second single “Modern Girl” has an upbeat feel that echoes his collaborators the 1975. The album’s lead single, “Alma Mater,” features **Lana Del Rey**, whose Antonoff-produced album, *Did You Know That There’s a Tunnel Under Ocean Blvd*, was nominated for a 2024 Best Album Grammy that Antonoff ended up losing to himself for the work he did on Taylor Swift’s *Midnights*. Some speculate that this album will be the last to bear the Bleachers

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moniker, noting that the final LP by Steel Train, Antonoff's first major band, is self-titled, as well as the fact that the album's third single, "Tiny Moves," is credited to "Jack Antonoff & Bleachers." Should that be the case, Bleachers will be going out on a high note. *Matt Hoffman*

Chris Potter

Eagle's Point EDITION



You certainly couldn't ask for a stronger quartet of contemporary jazz musicians.

Saxophonist **Chris**

Potter's accompanists, each among the most innovative living representatives of his instrument—pianist **Brad Mehldau**, bassist **John Patitucci** and drummer **Brian Blade**—have crossed paths before in various pairings. Patitucci and Blade, among their many credits, worked together with the late Wayne Shorter, and Mehldau, whose discography is also vast, sat in on one of those albums, *Alegría*, two decades ago. Mehldau and Blade can be heard together on 2021's Joshua Redman set *Round Again*, while Mehldau and Patitucci have also linked up before. But *Eagle's Point* marks these exemplary players' first time as a quartet, and comparisons, while inevitable, would be unfair—*Eagle's Point* projects its own personality and vibe. But it's also, despite the impressive pedigrees, undeniably a Potter-led set. All eight tracks are his compositions, and while Mehldau, in particular, is one of the most heralded pianists of the 21st century and provides much of the album's melodic and rhythmic support, Potter's saxophone is the dominant instrument on any given track. It all comes together in a big way four tracks in on the title tune. "Eagle's Point" finds Potter's tone at its brawniest and brashest, and his lines inexorably spellbinding. Mehldau's fills provide a model complement, while the ever-spirited rhythm section serves both as the anchor and an additional source of unpredictability. "Other Plane" investigates a different mood entirely, less manic, more linear, while both the opening and closing tunes, "Dream of Home" and "Horizon Dance," spotlight Potter at his most incendiary and generous, never forgetting just who's standing beside him and what they have to offer.

Jeff Tamarkin

Faye Webster

Underdressed at the Symphony

SECRETLY CANADIAN



Faye Webster's indie-pop is elegant yet comically absurd, a confusing soup of tenderness, detachment and stylistic non-sequiturs. (Alt-country pedal steel? Sure! Rapper cameos? You betcha. R&B



Faye Webster

hooks? Naturally.) The Wild West of streaming has conditioned us all to say "fuck genre," a noble and inspiring mission statement in many ways. But even in this post-everything era, it's still shocking how much the Atlanta songwriter manages to get away with—all the while popping up on Obama's "favorite songs" playlists ("Better Distractions" in 2020) and making a tiny but notable dent on the Billboard charts (her acclaimed fourth LP, 2021's *I Know I'm Funny Haha*). It's heartening that, even as Webster's profile has risen, so has her love for strange ideas. For the masterful *Underdressed at the Symphony*, that even applies to her release strategy (the album's most obvious single, "Feeling Good Today," is a mere 86 seconds of hilariously Auto-Tuned crooning and finger-strummed electric guitar) and the sequencing (the first track, the sweetly soulful "Thinking About You," stretches out to a patience-testing six and a half minutes, ending with a lengthy jam). But it's a testament to Webster's versatility and songcraft that most of these decisions feel graceful: "Lego Ring" pairs shoegaze distortion, tempo changes and the garbled vocal processing of Lil Yachty into a beautiful mindfuck—but as the song plays, you can't imagine it unfolding any other way. We need this level of absurdity in the pop music ether.

Webster is a national treasure.

Ryan Reed

John Leventhal

Rumble Strip RUMBLESTRIP



As a producer, songwriter and musician, **John Leventhal** has spent more than four decades making

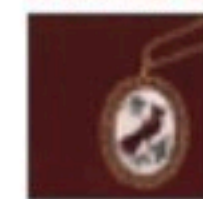
others sound better. The ridiculously long list of folks he's worked with—as diverse as the Blind Boys of Alabama, Tedeschi Trucks Band, David Crosby, William Bell, Joe Cocker and Elvis Costello—is the tipoff that he's comfortable within just about any genre, that he in fact welcomes the chance to go someplace new whenever the opportunity arises. Leventhal also serves regularly as the indispensable producer and go-to accompanist for a certain Rosanne Cash, who happens to be his wife for nearly three decades. He's won six Grammys to date but what Leventhal, who is 71 years old, never got around to, until now, was making a John Leventhal album. *Rumble Strip* checks off that box and, it should come as no surprise, is an ideal introduction to his many talents: production and songwriting, of course, but particularly his guitar skills, which dominate the instrumental tracks that comprise the majority of the record. Those range from the Alfred

Hitchcock-inspired but totally unspooky "Marion and Sam" to "Copland Clarinet Concerto," which Leventhal explains was taken from the classical composer's basic idea but filtered through a Duane Eddy sensibility. "Three Chord Monte" sports a lazy-summer-day down-home Chet Atkins-style lope, while "Meteor" nods to Howlin' Wolf's original "Spoonful," whether it intended to or not. Of course, if you're going to be married to **Rosanne Cash**, then you'd be a fool not to put her to work, and naturally, one of the only vocal tunes on the set, "That's All I Know About Arkansas," was co-written by the couple, who come together just as natural as can be. Hopefully, there'll be more where this came from.

Jeff Tamarkin

Friko

Where we've been, Where we go from here ATO



A great indie-rock album can shake you out of your malaise and make you feel something—not only on

an abstract atomic level that you can't always articulate, but also on a more practical level where you want to high-five your best friend while triumphantly blazing donuts in the parking lot of your old high school. **Friko's** music seems scientifically designed for such