

5 ARTISTS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT



JACK VAN CLEAF SAN DIEGO

Indie-Rock Meets Gen Z Folk

"I grew up listening to a lot of country music with my parents," Jack Van Cleaf shares, as he surveys his creative arc. "As a preteen, my music tastes shifted to alt-rock and pop-punk bands until I eventually threw myself into the indie-folk scene when I started writing my own music." Van Cleaf's journey began in San Diego, where he discovered his passion for songwriting as a teenager. But, drawn to the vibrant music scene of Nashville, he moved east to study at Belmont University, immersing himself in his craft and collaborating

with fellow musicians who would become lifelong friends. He released his debut LP, *Fruit From the Trees*, in 2022, going on to break out in 2023 with "Rattlesnake," a collaboration with Zach Bryan that resonated with listeners thanks to its raw honesty and introspective lyrics. The song quickly went viral, catching the attention of established artists like Noah Kahan, who lauded his talent and authenticity. Since then, Van Cleaf has

continued to evolve as an artist, blending genres and composing originals that speak to the universal experiences of young adulthood—his lyrics explore themes of love, loss, identity and the search for meaning in a world that often feels chaotic and uncertain. With his sophomore album, *JVC*, he delivers a testament to his growth as a songwriter and musician, showcasing his ability to craft material that is both deeply personal and universally relatable. "Things got tough for me, mentally, after graduating from college," Van Cleaf says. "This structure that I had come to know, and learned to be really good at functioning within, was gone, all of a sudden, and I found myself having a hard time finding the motivation to get out of bed. Most of the new songs from *JVC* came out of that turbulent part of my life." jackvancleaf.com **Matt Hoffman**



ICHIKO AOBA

URAYASU, CHIBA, JAPAN

A Journey to the Most Beautiful, Majestic Corners of Our World

To say that the music of Japanese singer, composer and guitarist Ichiko Aoba transports you to another world wouldn't be quite correct. Rather, her music takes you on a journey to the most beautiful, majestic corners of our world—be they around the globe or within our minds. Aoba's latest album, *Luminescent Creatures*, was influenced by the seasons she spent observing whale migration in Japan's Southern Ryukyu Archipelago—and she somehow captures that feeling of oceanic vastness across these hushed, intimate and orchestral pieces, all sung (or whispered) in Japanese. The dichotomy is breathtaking. Take "Aurora," a sparse, ethereal, finger-picked lullaby. "When I was recording 'Aurora,' I felt such profound solitude that even thinking about it now sends shivers down my spine," she says. "But performing it live, I feel imbued with so much life and energy. I feel as if I'm riding on the back of a giant storm." Aoba first made waves internationally in 2020 with *Windswept Adan*, a gorgeous concept album about a girl banished by her family to a remote island. With *Luminescent Creatures*, she's more concerned with feeling than story. These 11 compositions—some fleshed out with flutes, harp and a string section, others merely Aoba's voice and guitar—feel like floating in an infinite ocean. "[Swimming in the sea] feels like shedding, or perhaps forgetting, your human skin for a moment," Aoba says. "It's about becoming a part of this greater organ that covers the globe and gaining access to infinite possibilities." Drizzling sounds from her own field recordings over these slow, swirling songs, Aoba tries to melt her human experience into the history of the whole world, a humbling and comforting reminder. "I hope that [the music] is reassuring in the way a grandmother's humming is," she says.

ichikoaoba.com **Justin Jacobs**