“Can we move forward? Are we ready?”

Valerie June has opened her deepest channel yet to create her fourth studio album, *Owls, Omens, and Oracles*. The Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter and three-time Americana Music Honors and Awards nominee weaves fresh medicinal downloads of love, sweetness, goodness, and joy together with songs that have flowed through her for years. Halfway through a decade of immense and rapid global change, she asserts a multidimensional Blackness steeped in laughter, truth, magic, delight, and interdependence. The opening track and first single, "Joy, Joy!", gives us an irresistible, playful, and effervescent invitation to surrender to the light always available in our souls. This album is a radical statement to break with the skepticism, surveillance, and doom scrolling – let yourself celebrate your aliveness. Connect, weep, change, open.  
  
Rooted in the belief that what we focus on is what we manifest, June dreams a songpath forward that leaves no one behind. She has been softening and clarifying her sound since the 2013 release of *Pushin' Against A Stone*, through *The Order of Time, The Moon and Stars: Prescriptions for Dreamers,* and *Under Cover.* From the Kennedy Center and opening for The Rolling Stones at Hyde Park to supporting Tyler Childers, Trevor Hall, Brandi Carlile, Gary Clark Jr., and John Prine, June offers us a root system spanning Earth's magma core to the cosmos. This newest work shows Valerie's own spiritual growth, her deepening, the opening of ancestral channels into both her glorious voice and her tender lyrics.  
  
*"*Valerie June has built a devoted following by ignoring expectations. She is simultaneously  
rural and cosmopolitan, historically minded and contemporary, idiosyncratic and fashionable, mystical and down-to-earth*."* — *New York Times*June is not alone in crafting this sacred field for the contemplation of love and being human. Her dynamic and distinct voice centers an incredible circle of collaborators**,** including producer M. Ward and special guests Blind Boys of Alabama, Norah Jones, and DJ Cavem Moetavation.  
  
In this vast realm, we can follow June's singular sound, a north star as steady and undeniable as any true love story, telling us to "trust the path." She is inviting us out of the small boxes that keep us apart from each other, her music creating a space where we are already together, already one. The horizon changes as we get closer to it, but our songstress is sure-footed in the face of uncertainty and change. She wants everyone who listens to this music to *want* to be alive, to love, co-creating a future together.  
  
Mavis Staples, Newport Folk Festival, and Hardly Strictly Bluegrass Festival were the auspicious forces that led June and Ward to record fourteen original songs at 64 Sound in Los Angeles. While producing Mavis' 2016 album, *Living on a High Note,* Ward invited June to contribute a song that became the title track. *"I had been a fan of both The Staple Singers and She and Him (Zooey Deschanel and M. Ward) for years, so joining Mavis and Ward in the studio was a dream come true. I loved his production style and the way he captured distinct female voices. I can remember the smell of the room and the feel of the air the first time I heard Mavis and Zooey sing. When you hear voices like that, you can't confuse them with anyone else out there. It was also a surprise to be in the room with stellar musicians like Steven Hodges, who worked with artists I admire who have singularly unique sounds from Tom Waits to David Lynch."*Backstage is where the magic happens. Musicians often find themselves traveling to similar festivals. With a spirit of togetherness circling her at every turn, in summer/fall 2023, June joined Ward for spontaneous guest appearances during his sets at Newport Folk Festival and Hardly Strictly Bluegrass, setting the plan in motion to work together in the studio. *"One of the things I enjoy about listening to M. Ward's music is that he's an incredibly amazing guitar player. While he can shred and rock, he also 'gets' the blues. After sitting in with him for those live sets, we vowed to work together one day on a record."*Welcoming June to his stomping ground in California, Ward chose Pierre de Reeder (Rilo Kiley, Jenny Lewis) to engineer the album. Sonically taking on a signature analog production sound, the style intertwines the old and the new. *"Bands and groups from The Strokes to The Ronettes have always stolen my heart. I wanted a low-fi, gritty sound with many of these songs. I wanted to get grungy, but I also wanted to keep the softness of a singer-songwriter with a guitar at an open mic night."*An instant foot-stompin' hip-shaker, "Joy, Joy!" opens the album with an exuberance we are all born longing to find in the souls that surround us. The adventure begins with Kaveh Rastegar on bass (John Legend, Beck) and Steven Hodges on drums (Tom Waits, David Lynch). Throwing it all back on the soulful "All I Really Wanna Do," June sings and layers her voice reminiscent of an idiosyncratic version of the Supremes. She's even started to expand her compositions to simplified chords and notes on the piano. *"String instruments (guitar, banjo, banjolele) are the only instruments I play, but I suppose if there's an instrument in the room that speaks to me, then I can write a song on anything. I adore Daniel Johnston's songs. His songwriting is so simple, yet powerful."* As June's voice growls, hisses, studders, moans, and chants its way through the anthemic rocker "Endless Tree," it's clear that every song on the album is composed with a medicine, message, and purpose of honoring our interconnectedness.

*"Getting the courage to do something small  
Lifting the spirits of all that you saw  
Feeling the tiniest spark in your heart  
Only an ember can light up the dark  
Are you ready to see  
A world where we could all be free  
As branches of an endless tree?"*

While June plays many instruments, she clarifies that the voice is an instrument and will have its own way of serving the song. Her voice grips us with visceral twists and a fierceness of raw emotion that threads textures and tones through the needle of a multi-genre American quilt, striking against notions that voices should always sound polished and pretty. Gracefulness and gentleness harmonize with dissonance, edginess, and precarity in the sharpest parts of her voice, evoking a tenderness within even the hardest heart on "Trust the Path." A hand-clappin', toe-tapper, "Love Me Any Ole Way," leads us from Memphis to New Orleans with the horn arrangements by Nate Walcott (Bright Eyes, Conor Oberst, and the Mystic Valley Band). A published author, June, performs spoken word with her sultry southern accent, reading a poem from her book *Maps for the Modern World* (Andrews McMeel, Simon and Schuster). Earning the admiration of Bob Dylan, June walks in his footsteps from American rock music to folky songs like "Sweet Things Just for You" featuring backing vocals from Norah Jones to "Missin' You," which includes Ward's silky Mississippi John Hurt and John Fahey style fingerpicking guitar.  
  
Every single note June sings is dusted with her distinctive Tennessee twang, but that doesn't mean she should ever be limited by genre. June holds the complexity of "My life is a country song," *and* "I am multidimensional, beyond category." This album is expansive, growing from her psychedelic folk, indie rock, Appalachian, bluegrass, country soul, orchestral pop, and blues root system into an intergalactic web of wisdom.  
  
Listening to her work, we are reminded that whoever created this Earth didn't stick to one genre, so why should we?

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